THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE 42

TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE EDGE SUMMER 2005 FOUR QUID

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by PAUL MELOY

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DOUGLAS LAIN
MATTHEW FRANCIS
DARREN SPEEGLE
JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

JAPAN

JOHN PAUL CATTON

FILMS

STEPHEN VOLK

BOOKS

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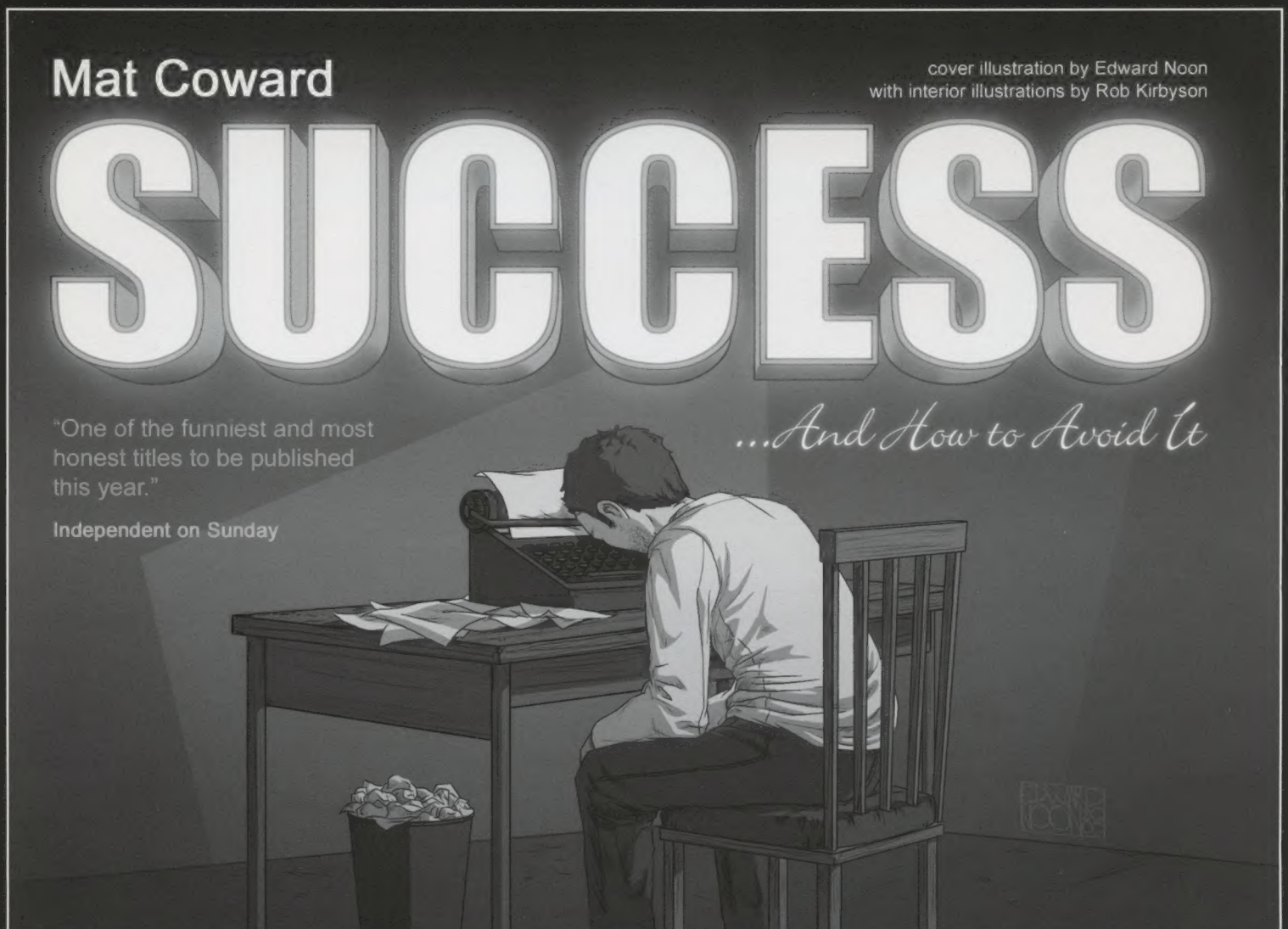
COMMENT

THE DODO

ART

‹ CAMILLE KUO
MIKE BOHATCH
ALF KLOSTERMAN
VINCENT CHONG
CHRIS NURSE


Mat Coward
cover illustration by Edward Noon
with interior illustrations by Rob Kirbyson
SUCCESS
...And How to Avoid It
"One of the funniest and most honest titles to be published this year."
Independent on Sunday

'DO NOT LIVE A DAY LONGER WITHOUT THIS BOOK' NICHOLAS ROYLE, TIME OUT

There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

1. Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book
2. Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they *should* write a book

Mat Coward's *Success ... And How To Avoid It* is different. Combining humour with practical information, and based firmly on hard-won personal knowledge, it's a tonic, an antidote, a survival kit for every writer who is fed up with being told how easy it is to write yourself a fortune.

First of all, it's a good read. Ironic, funny, anecdotal, hyperbolic — but always remembering that there is a body of information and advice which, combined with talent, hard work and enormous amounts of luck, might just make the difference to aspiring writers.

Other writers' books say "You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules." This book says "You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place. Still, if you are determined to embark on this foolish quest, you'd better read this first." If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

Success ... And How To Avoid It — at last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading.

'Freelance writing is not a lifestyle choice, it's a masochist's pastime, and in exploring this contention *Success ... And How To Avoid It* brings truth to the old axiom of the desperate: "You've got to laugh!". If bursting into unstoppable fits of convulsive laughter — you know, when your bodily functions are seemingly controlled by some sadistic invisible force — is liable to embarrass you, do not read this book in public'
— Tim Lebbon

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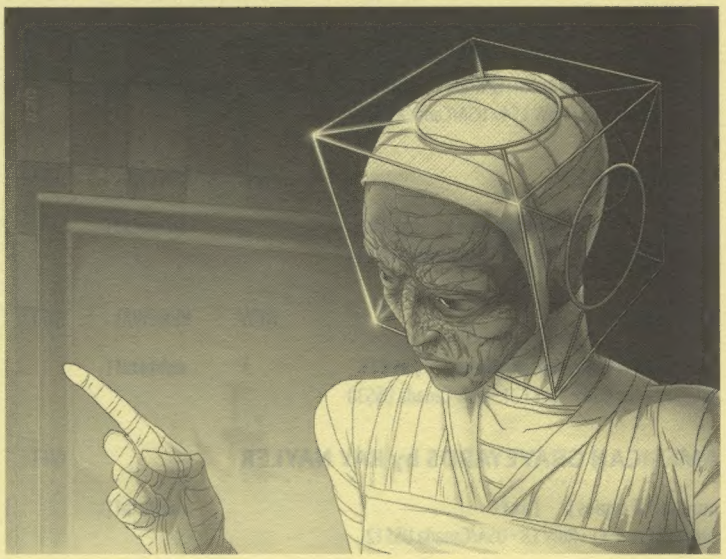

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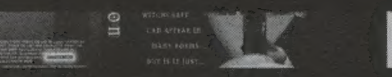

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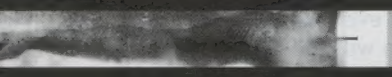

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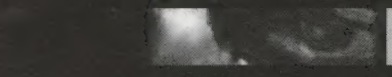

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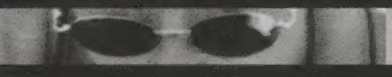

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EDITORIAL THE NEXT ALTERNATIVE

ANDY COX

It's been a very lively discussion both online (seven long threads on the discussion forum) and offline, and no doubt it'll continue for some time yet following this announcement: from now on this will be the magazine formerly known as *The Third Alternative*.

To recap, briefly, this is what's happening and why . . .

The arrival of *Interzone* means that we no longer have to compete with it for any kind of science fictional content, and that gives us an opportunity to repackage and reposition TTA slightly, enabling us to concentrate and expand on what it does best, resulting in an improved magazine reaching readers who perhaps haven't been sure exactly what the magazine's all about. The title *The Third Alternative* hasn't helped much in that regard. It made sense when we began, when we were forging a middle path between the warring camps of genre and mainstream literature, establishing an outlet for stories that combined the best qualities of both. Now, with a stable of magazines under the TTA umbrella, all of whom share the qualities we value in good fiction regardless of any genre niche, it makes less sense to have a magazine carrying the actual name.

So we began the search for a new title, something accurate and dynamic and visually appealing, something easy to *picture*, and in the end – despite many fine suggestions – we've plumped for *Black Static*. This will ring a bell with most of you, it being the title of Paul Meloy's story in TTA40. About that time Paul gave me his definition of the term – "Black Static is a phrase used by ghost hunters and people researching the supernatural. It describes the background noise on a recording of a supposedly haunted place in which these people believe they can hear the voices/noises of the dead. Spurious talk from dark places, and if that isn't a good description of fiction writing I don't know what is" – and that was the clincher for me.

I should say at this point that some people have remained resolutely against the proposals and/or any name-change, and that others who are in favour generally aren't particularly taken with *Black Static* as a title. Some of those, though, have gradually warmed to it, and the consensus is that of all the suggestions *Black Static* has proved to have the most stickability. Most people I've talked to, however, have always loved the title.

So now I have to offer you an idea of how *Black Static* might be represented, on the front cover for example. This is where Edward Noon comes in, and what you see opposite is the *very first draft*. Naturally there'll be some tweaks, and don't pay too much attention to some of the actual words, and please try to imagine it in crackling colour, but I think it captures perfectly the cinematic look and feel we are going for.

As to actual content, I would like to repeat that everything you love about TTA fiction will still be here. Those of you who think you don't like 'horror' will see no change in the stories, and you need not be concerned about a possible lack of variety. We have stories set in the future (Will McIntosh's 'The Fantasy Jumper'), the past (F. Brett Cox's 'The Serpent and the Hatchet Gang'), other countries ('Pale Saints and Dark Madonnas' by Jamie Barras), and so on. The magazine's other coverage will widen, not despite the new focus but because of it, and we'll be adding some new features. I firmly believe that these changes will result in a better, more successful magazine.

At the time of writing it looks like we'll be increasing the page count too. The cover and subscription prices, however, will *not* increase, and we have in fact introduced another possible saving with the further discounted *Black Static/Interzone* dual subscription.

Every effort will be made to release the first *Black Static* at the same time the Autumn issue of TTA would be released (September), and we'll stick to the same quarterly frequency with a view to moving bimonthly. Underlining our committment to new fiction, the debut *Black Static* will come with a free book collecting nine stories by Dan Bennett, who is just one of the many Next Big Things you'll continue to encounter here.

If your subscription expires with this issue or the next (check the insert for a reminder), please renew as usual. If you're the tiniest bit concerned or have any questions, just get in touch directly or via the online forum (http://www.ttapress.com/discus), but I *guarantee* that you have nothing to worry about and everything to look forward to.

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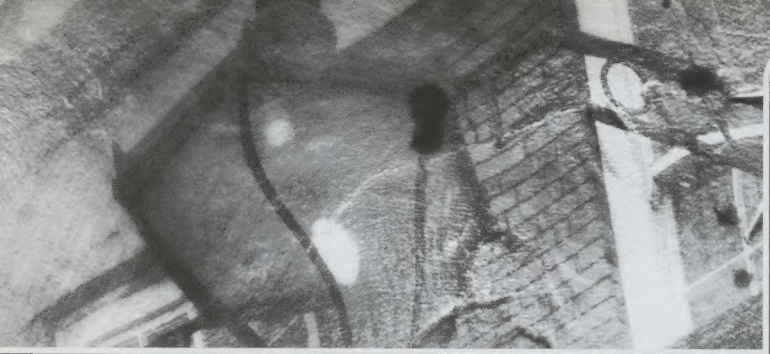
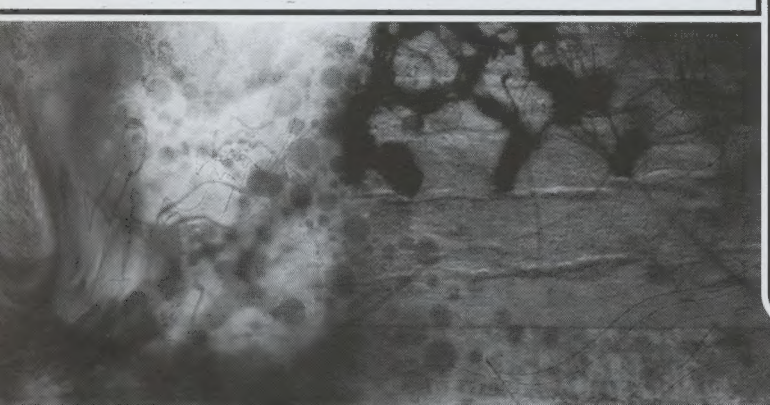


DYING in the ARMS of JEAN HARLOW (the COMING of the AUTOSCOPES)

by PAUL MELOY

ILLUSTRATED by VINCENT CHONG



I found a couple of pandas consuming my garden furniture this morning. Ever since they found a way to genetically modify the bastards to *mange tout* with an infusion of goat protoplasm or suchlike, and some bleeding heart Animal Rights activists liberated a facility and set a breeding pair free, you can't move for them. No natural predators, see, the East Anglian panda.

I ran at them, waving my arms and shouting, keeping eye contact and ducking my head in the way set out in the leaflets. One of them looked up, languidly masticating a chair arm, and began to lumber away down the garden. The other one just sat there in its charming iconic pose and arced a stream of urine onto my shoes, unresponsive to my government-endorsed panda management.

"Fuck the Public Information," I said. I took a Browning automatic out of my coat pocket and shot the monochrome bastard in the face.

Gun smoking, I looked about. I could see a herd of them bolting away across the fields, alarmed by the echoing gunshot. Some of their cubs tumbled after them, all paws and fluff. I drew a bead on the smallest and let off a couple of rounds. I think I took an ear off.

I stood with my hands on my hips, shaking my head. I was curious to see how effective that *pandavulax* virus might be. The government had authorised its release into the countryside last month using a couple of infected captives as vectors. The other day I'd found one in the lane on the way to the pub, lying on its back on the verge. It was breathing weakly and had froth round its chops. Its eyes were like dabs of toothpaste.

I holstered the Browning and examined the damage to the patio furniture. I cursed myself for not dragging them into the conservatory last night, but I'd been too drunk by the time we turned in to bother. Always the way isn't it? The one time you forget, you get the pandas.

I went into the garage and had a rummage for the disposal bags. The government had made the local councils issue them to all households. I found a couple (it was policy to double-bag) and began the job of clearing up.

The panda was a big boy and I had only managed to drag the bag under half of it, leaving the upper body and head still lolling on the grass when I heard a voice say: "Hey, mister. What you doing?"

I paused, breathing heavily and wiped sweat from my brow. My hair was soaked and I had huge sweat rings under my arms like plague spots. I cursed under my breath. It was that little Lolita from next door.

"The panda's had an accident," I said with a regretful look on my face. "It fell down – "

"You shot it in the face," she said. "I saw you from my bedroom window. You blew its brains out. I'm telling the police."

I couldn't believe it.

"You're mistaken," I said, but the evidence was there at my feet. I stepped in front of the panda, hoping to conceal it.

She craned her neck, appeared momentarily perplexed and stood there chewing softly on her lower lip. Her eyes unfocused a little and she used the ball of her bare right foot to rub distractedly the fondant instep of her left. It was a cute gesture, I can tell you, but it didn't mean I was going to try and fuck her again, OK?

I just wasn't getting this panda disappeared.

Technically it was illegal to grease them on private property. It was government policy to call in the exterminators but the insurance was up in the ionosphere, even with a full no-claims. Still, there were the reward points.

BAR

I left the panda where it was and wandered back indoors. I poured myself a glass of beer and leaned against the bar dreaming about the girl next door and a handful of kumquats. I was still thinking about that when the door opened and Frank walked in. He was bare-chested and was drying his hair with a bath towel. Frank was my brother-in-law. I drained my glass. "Want one of these, Frank?"

He looked up at the clock. "Not early enough for me," he said. "Did I hear gunshots? Fuck." He walked into the conservatory. The muscles on his back looked like a tray of loaves.

I got myself another beer and went out to join him by the pool. He was looking down at the panda.

"He shot it," the girl said. She was wearing a bikini. Her tits were like smoke detectors and it looked like the little red lights were flashing. She came over and stood beside Frank. "Hi," she said. "Can I have a swim?"

Frank looked down at her. He grinned wildly and put a hairy arm around her. "Hey, baby," he said. "Want me to pick you up by the ankles and *lick* you like an *ice* cream? How 'bout that?"

She smiled. "I dunno."

I took a sip of beer. Indoors, the phone was ringing.

There's a town on the coast called Invidisham-next-the-Sea. Rory Reeks doesn't like it there very much. It has a cramped, cheerless atmosphere, full of pound shops and joke shops that don't really sell jokes in the sneezing powder and whoopee cushion kind of way he remembers as a boy, but are emporiums of smut instead. He finds this kind of humour demoralising and unsettling; to Rory, it's a bit like he co-exists with a coarse sub-species intrinsically oblivious to taste. These people must lack proper stimulation, he thinks. That and their cheap packets of Richmond cigarettes and deleterious gene pool.

Invidisham-next-the-Sea has a long concrete promenade with no jolly lights or powder blue railings. It has no pier and no gardens to speak of, merely a large sloping expanse of grass that's really a bit too steep and which on wet days – and there are plenty of those – can endanger the elderly population by accelerating them beyond their optimal velocity as they attempt to pick their way down from the tea shops at the top to the edge of the promenade at the bottom.

Rory saw an old girl go over once, whinnying like a racehorse, and she didn't stop until she hit the beach. He was fairly sure she was quite badly injured.

There's a row of disconsolate looking beach huts down there on the front. They're poorly maintained and draughty and are used predominantly for defecating in and sex acts. Rory assumes this, actually, but it's on the cards.

The other concession to beachfront cheer is the crazy golf course. It has nine oblong concrete concourses carpeted with mangy fabric the colour of kelp. Each hole has a hazard to negotiate, like a castle with a narrow drawbridge for instance, which you attempt to scuttle your golf ball over. Some of the hazards, particularly the fibreglass crocodile, he finds rather sinister. One of them, a squat, ruddy-faced policeman lying on his side out of whose fat bottom the ball is supposed to pass, is just offensive.

There's an amusement arcade at the back of the car park. It's not really an arcade, more of a warehouse full of video games. Rory believes a lot of crime is formulated in that arcade to be perpetrated later around town. Where's the amusement in that?

Last season, there was a desultory old busker called Drinky who set up outside the arcade. He really was the least attractive and able entertainer Rory had ever seen. He was dressed like a tramp and had a wide, yellowing beard covering his mouth and throat. He wore a filthy tan fabric hat with little black pompoms arranged vertically from its tip to its brim. One of the pompoms had come off at some point and all that remained was a little sprig of black cotton between the pompoms above and below. It reminded Rory of a hairy mole. He had a big red clown's nose on, but it wasn't mirthful, just a little deformed and grubby.

He had an old acoustic guitar slung over his shoulders and his performance amounted to little more than strumming its slack, tuneless strings and shuffling from foot to foot.

Rory once watched a group of men come out of the arcade and surround him. Drinky just stood there, continuing to strum, when all at once, one of the men stepped forward and kicked him with incredible force where his low slung crutch hung beneath the curve of his guitar. Old Drinky went down really hard and the men just laughed and pointed, then went back into the arcade.

Rory works at the supermarket on the big estate outside town. Well, it's more a grocery outlet that sells cheap brands you've never heard of to people on supported incomes. There is a sign at the till that says NO QUIBBLE GUARANTEE. Rory can't make up his mind whether *quibble* is a word that is either underused or too ridiculous to be used at all. He supposes quibbling is really the kind of thing you'd only find people doing at the checkouts in one of these shops, perhaps pointing out the dent in the side of a can of economy lychees, purchased to add zest and mystique to a trolley full of poor quality staples.

At weekends it's basically Rory, Milton, his Workability-provided assistant, and Derek the Golden Greeter (HERE TO HELP! his large-print badge declares, although all Rory has ever witnessed Derek muster is a kind of wilful hindrance in his approach to customer care – an example of this was the time he announced his availability as bag-packer to a struggling mother by scooping her baby out of the trolley and rolling it clumsily from its swaddling blanket onto the conveyer belt whereupon it was whipped away and got its fontanel dented on a four-pack of reduced-to-clear All Day Breakfasts). There are the checkout girls but no one has much to do with them because they badly arouse Milton and traumatised him quite profoundly once by showing him the edge of one of their mons. Rory thinks they must have to demonstrate an obligatory love bite and history of terminations to meet the criteria to work on the tills in this shop.

Rory was outside, watching Milton careering round the car park on the end of a rattling conga of trolleys. He'd seen him take a couple of wing mirrors off already so he was none too impressed with Milton's morning's work. He was, in fact, trying to remember the Makaton for *fired*, but then his heart sank as he saw Dean Brazil drive into the lot in his delivery truck. He went back into the store and through to the delivery yard, or *glory hole*, as Dean liked to call it, showing off to Milton with goatish winks.

There was a sudden, bright clattering sound and a yell and

WE HIT THE ROAD IN FRANK'S OLD CHEVY KODIAK FLATBED. HE'D HAD IT SHIPPED OVER FROM THE STATES FOR TWELVE GRAND. IT WAS LOW TO THE GROUND WITH A WIDE, JEEP-LIKE CAB

Rory knew with a heavy despondency that Milton had seen Dean arrive and had propelled his trolleys right up onto the forecourt and into Derek in his eagerness to get out to the yard and greet him first. The doors flew open behind him and Milton waddled past at speed. Rory heard, "You bandy little cun–" and looked back to see Derek feebly trying to push himself out from beneath a pile-up of trolleys. He looked like he'd been ambushed by a group of skeletal daleks.

Rory followed Milton into the yard. He had already seized the small palette forklift and was shoving it with the same rampant and regardless glee with which he handled the trolleys. His shirttail flapped and Rory winced to see the dark vertical seam running down it, evidence that he was still tucking it too far down between his buttocks and *inside* his pants. Had he been outside like that?

Dean had parked up and was already engaged in a monologue with one of the checkout girls who had slid out for a cigarette: "Yeah, I used to do a lot of banger racing up at Arlington. That's a tight old track up there. Tried a Rover once. 3.5S. Old wedge shape. Give it a massive handful. They tend to push out a bit – " He saw Milton and grinned. "Get us a cup of tea, Julie."

Julie pouted around her Raffle. "What did your last slave die of?"

"Repeated kicks to the head, Jules. White, two sugars, there's a good girl." He turned away and began to undo the buckles along the underside of his truck which released the taut fabric flank. "I bet she goes down faster than a pint of lager on a hot day. Had some of *that* have you, Milt?"

Rory wished Dean wouldn't talk to Milton like that; it sends him demented and then you can't get any work out of him for hours. He just disappears into the toilet for the rest of his shift.

Milton threw back his head and flared his nostrils giving Rory a view of the chartreuse flakes barnacled to his sinuses.

"All right, Rory? Come on Milt, let's get this lot unloaded." Dean went over to a stack of crates and perched on a leading edge. He took out a pouch of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. Milton pumped the handle of the trolley until the forks were level with the first palette on the back of Dean's truck then he slid them through the wooden slats, gave it one more crank and tried to pull the load backwards out of the vehicle.

Dean was going, "Took my missus to Felate last night. It's marriage guidance for couples where the wife won't give blowjobs any more. Look at your face, Rory. You're the kind of bloke who'd catch the head of his prick in his zip and say, 'Actually, I meant to do that.' Stroll on. Come on, Milton! Pull it like you're pulling a black man off your mother!"

To say Milton was overdoing it was something of an understatement. In his desire to please Dean he was jacking palettes off the back of the truck with the urgency of a looter at the face of a riot-damaged shop front.

Julie came back out carrying a grimy mug with the generic name of some optimistic-sounding antidepressant written on the side of it. She put it on the crate next to Dean and flounced off.

Dean watched her depart. He lapped along the edge of his rizla. "That Julie," he said, "I've seen more meat on an otter's cock."

I noticed Frank hadn't finished getting shot of the dead panda. He'd shoved it in the pool. It floated face down, its stubby arms and legs splayed out at its corners, stabilising it. A filmy pink medium drifted about its left ear like toadspawn and tomato pips. The girl from next door had gone. I wasn't surprised.

I told him about the phone call. "Fuck," he said.

We hit the road in Frank's old Chevy Kodiak flatbed. He'd had it shipped over from the States for twelve grand. It was low to the ground with a wide, jeep-like cab. He'd always wanted one and, now that he had it, he used it for little other than cruising around the fens picking up girls from the traveller camps and driving at pandas. If I tell you it kept him happy, you'd have to believe me. Saints and psychopaths. The only truly happy people. No tension, see.

We were aiming to head across country as far as the coast then take the sea road north until we got to Invidisham-next-the-Sea.

On approach, as you wind along endless dusty fen roads, Invidisham-next-the-Sea backs evasively away into the Wash, giving you glimpses of a flat industrial roof here and a staggered row of terraces there; it shrugs into the rough grey waves as though trying to slope off without drawing attention to itself. But you eventually catch up with Invidisham-next-the-Sea, and then it squares up to you like a middle-aged drunk apprehended hanging around outside the girls' toilets, full of ready bravado and the habitual, companionable routine you've grown sick of hearing time and time again.

After the ambulance had taken Milton away, everyone went across to the Macebearer's for a debrief.

Dean had an arm round Julie. He was shaking his head. He had the misty look in his eyes of someone nostalgically recalling some moronic achievement. "Milton," he said, "can't believe it. Kept the secret of his dodgy ticker from his colleagues." He shook his head again and glanced down at his pint. His dirty grey T-shirt had pulled up out of his trousers allowing a hairy crescent of belly to pout over his belt. His prolapsed navel was defined against the taut fabric like a ramekin full of gristle. He picked up a menu from the bar. "You hungry, Jules?"

Rory looked around the pub. A couple of girls sat in the corner heckling their restless toddlers through an unrelenting haze of fag smoke. They were as thin as council house carpet and wore matching plasters on their heels where their Achilles tendons had rubbed raw on the backs of their cheap stilettos. Rory imagined them shopping at Motherneglect, buying Silk Cut and Ritalin over the counter and noshing your hood for a kind word. Genetic litter, Rory thinks. Wanks made flesh.

The Macebearer's atmosphere was dominated by the dry, cheerless smell of the carvery; under baking lights beneath a glass cloche lay a slew of computer-grey turkey slices and a few brittle rinds of pork gleaming like infected wounds. There was a well of scummed-over, meconium-coloured gravy.

Dean drew Rory's attention to the menu. "Wild rice and gourmet lemon grass and one thing and another. By the time they serve it up it just tastes like a fuckim pocknoodle. I'll have the chilli. Know what I'm getting. Jules?" Delayed shock and alcohol were disinhibiting Dean more than ever. He started going on about porn to Derek who, in turn, was staring up at Dean with a look of unanchored dismay. "This big black bloke's giving her one from behind and I swear it looks like he's trying to nudge a *dachshund* up her gary – "

The estate had grown up around the outskirts of the town, effectively ringing it in against the coastline, around thirty years ago; it was the vision of a local architect, whose philosophical rarefaction allowed only for bleak concrete clads piled into oblongs, cubes and hexagons, creating flat rainlaked rooftops, switchback overpasses and a network of alleyways that occasionally debouched onto a patchy rectangle of space which might be called a recreation area or merely an accident of ground hemmed between four indifferent, identical walls; it would depend on whether there was a metal climbing frame or a lone swing dangling from some hollow iron pipe. The architect had passed some time in East Berlin, it appeared, and had been inspired by the panorama of ochre hexagonal structures he had seen from his hotel window, spread out beneath him like a vast, industrial beehive. The estate resembled some great inverse, primordial Gormenghast, a looming, sullen structure, all poverty and neglect, with what real money there was scattered around the arc of its outer perimeter. No Hall of Bright Carvings here. Just the crocodile-eye reflection of drear skies off the windows and gritty little pools beneath the climbing frames. And the only Titus, hepatitis.

If you follow any number of the concourses that lead into the heart of the estate you will eventually come across a broad, paved plaza. High walls containing flats overlook it, each balconied floor accessed by stairwells ascending from the square's four corners. At ground level are the shops and, making up half of a whole side and separated from the *VAL-YOU!* Bargain Market by the arched entrance to the square, is the Macebearer.

Rory was in the toilet. Dean was creating a radius of discomfort which had grown to encompass everyone at, and behind, the bar as his voice had become more penetrating and its content more off-colour.

Both Rory and Dean had flats that overlooked the plaza. Rory felt trapped and stultified having to live in an insubstantial, narrow enclosure as papery as a wasp's nest and dreamed of days ahead when a florid fiction of romance and opportunity would blow into his life and whip him away through some rift in the Undeniable Progression of Life continuum; Dean just wanted to do his place up (in his mind's eye, Dean saw rooms full of black self-assembly shelf units, red mock-leather sofas and a flat-screen TV the size of an upended pool table. Lots of brushed silver aluminium appliances in the kitchenette). Now, Rory was thinking about knocking off so he could go up to his flat and spend the evening adding links to his Jean Harlow website. He was pretty pleased with it as far as it goes. She was so captivating. Did you know that Rin-Tin-Tin died in her arms? Rory thinks that's so romantic. Nothing like that ever happens here. No glamour in his life. Only his on-off girlfriend, Pam. Pam, with her perennial and largely treatment-resistant fungal infections perpetuated within the low cost panties she buys from the store's affordable nylon lingerie range. Pam's idea of high living is a night out at the dog circuit on a Thursday to wager the odd quid on spavined greyhounds with names like Antiperistalsis Lady. Then she'll try and get off with one of the trainers who skulk around the edge of the track after the races. They invariably wear Matalan jogging bottoms and XL vests, forearms dense with a verdigris of misjudged tattoos and are frankly welcome to buy her a Smirnoff Ice and try to get their chapped, pikey hands on her muggy pubis.

Rory's brother got out of Invidisham-next-the-sea. He got as far down the coast as Great Yarmouth where he does regular stand up in the comedy clubs, got a bit of glamour in his life. He sent Rory one of his reviews, cut out of the local paper: *Some people burn with an incandescent blaze of talent. Mick Reeks smoulders like a tyre-dump fire: slow and remorseless, giving off low-slung clouds of bitter, toxic fumes.* Rory wishes he had talent.

He doesn't even get respect from his staff. Last week one of them wrote: *Rory is a big stroker and lesbian and impotent and has nostral hair big twat* on his office door in permanent marker. And the other day, when Derek asked him to sign his timesheet, he did his usual elegant flourish and distinctly heard Derek mutter, "I said sign it, not colour it *in*."

Rory zipped up and made his way back out to the bar. He was probably going to have to help Dean back to his flat and he had made his mind up to do it sooner rather than later.

As he re-entered the bar, Rory looked up and suddenly felt the world tip a little further out of kilter than usual. He could still hear Dean, who was informing others in fond tones of his little stepdaughter: "She's made a hole up between her Cindy doll's legs with a ballpoint and's using my roll-up filters as *tampons*. Growing up so fast these days." And right behind him, outside and visible through the plate glass window which overlooked the car park, Rory could see Milton coming towards the pub.

Rory frowned and narrowed his eyes. He reached out a hand and took hold of a brass rail that ran along the edge of a trough of artificial plants embedded in what looked like artificial chips of bark. On the wall to his left was a notice board advertising LOCAL IMFO. He took a couple of steps further into the bar, his entire concentration focused on the strangely distorted shape of Milton making its way between two rows of vehicles. No one else seemed to have noticed. Dean was foaming on to a dull-eyed Julie. Derek was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar, his head moving in an almost imperceptible figure of eight as he watched the fruit machine repeat its endless rapid cycle of illuminations.

Milton was now standing directly outside the Macebearer. His head switched back and forth as though trying to locate something elusive, and then looked straight in through the window and directly at Rory.

Rory shrieked. Everyone in the bar turned and looked at him. Dean's patter dried up and the last thing he said was, " – and got a dose off her," before there was the sound of gunshots, and Rory was the one person in perfect position to observe his brother and his brother-in-law, Frank, come edging round the side of the Macebearer, both of them pumping bullets into the side of Milton's head.

Milton's top half atomized. The force of the bullets threw him four feet to the right. He hit the window and remained leaning against the glass as though left propped up there by someone inside having a drink. Frank stuck his gun into the waistband of his pants and went over to the body. He nudged it with his boot then stepped nimbly back as it toppled sideways and hit the concrete, leaving a thick, gory arc on the glass.

Rory stumbled across to the door and hauled it open. It was beginning to get dark and the sodium lights were

RORY GOT BULLIED A LOT AT SCHOOL. HE COPED BY DEVELOPING AN INTEREST IN OLD MOVIES. HE HAD POSTERS OF JEAN HARLOW ALL OVER HIS SIDE OF THE BEDROOM. SOMETHING ABOUT HER JUST ENTHRALLED HIM

coming on. Everything was taking on a thin, tangerine patina. The roofs of the remaining parked cars glowed as though made from a fragile, alien metal.

Mick and Frank came through the open door. Rory followed them as they went over to the bar. Mick was pale, his eyes were wide and he looked pretty elated. Frank looked like he'd remembered his training. Mick leaned against the bar. "Scotch, no ice. Frank, champagne? Rory? What you having?"

"A migraine?" Rory said weakly.

"Don't be so fucking *camp*, Rors. Have a drink. Oh, and barricade all the doors and windows."

Everyone was staring at the new arrivals. Mick lit a cigarette and blew smoke towards the optics. "What's occurring?" enquired Dean. His voice was shaking. He kept darting glances through the window, his gaze dwelling on that swoop of *claret* in the corner of the glass.

Rory looked around. He felt perplexed and dizzy. The paramedics had put an oxygen mask over Milton's face and connected him to an array of monitors before whisking him away to hospital on blues and twos. He had been ashen and sweaty and his face had looked like a crumpled *dim sum* wrapped in cling film. One of the paramedics had mildly bollocked Rory for giving Milton a glass of water while they waited for the ambulance to arrive. Everyone had been standing about. Like now, everyone standing about in the pub, looking blank, vacant, outwardly devoid of even basic metabolism. Somebody breathed; Rory realized it was the sound of his own respiration. He drew in a gasp. Everyone looked at him. Mick turned, raised an eyebrow.

"What's going on?" said Rory. "What's happening?"

"I'll explain," Mick said.

The barmaid brought Mick's order over. "I drink from the bottle," growled Frank.

Earlier today I got a phone call from my agent. His name is Jon Index. You can't find him in the phone book, if you know what I mean. He finds you.

He told me he had a special job for me. Not a gig; this was all about my *other* job. My *Paladin* job. This is weird, telling you about it, but now I have to, so this is it.

When Rory and I were little boys, our father beat us. He drank, he gambled, he lost; he was unable to contain his disappointment, so he beat us. He terrified us, he roared and thundered at us, he broke my ribs and my arm in three places, Rory spent two nights in hospital. We both lost teeth. But he was remorseful, so our love for him – the fraught, troubled, fragile tenderness hurt and bewildered children feel toward their impaired and haphazardly damaging parents – never quite died. Which I think is a good thing. You can't see humour in the world if your soul is distorted by hatred.

We got older and the beatings stopped. He was verbal and punchy, but we rolled with it and finally, one night, he didn't come home at all. I was fourteen, Rory was twelve; Dad had stepped out in front of a Triumph Dolomite and his long losing streak was over.

Rory got bullied a lot at school. He coped by developing an interest in old movies. He had posters of Jean Harlow all over his side of the bedroom. Something about her just enthralled him. Most of us were frantically pulling ourselves off over Victoria Principal around this time, but not old Rors. He just gazed up at Jean, hands respectfully behind his head, and reflected peacefully on her jaded, silver-screen glamour and alcohol-fuelled demise.

I got round the bullying by using humour. Coarse, cutting, scorning stuff developed over time to protect me from the witless tossers and ingratiate me with the older lads.

Then I made a career of it. And that was when Index found me.

"You're quite amusing," he said. I was sitting at the bar after my regular ten minute Friday night slot at the club. "Bittersweet yet callous. You've built a repertoire up from a lifetime of genuine hurt. That's admirable."

"You've summed me up," I said. "I can die now."

Index laughed. He looked about fifty. He was average height, average build. He wore blue jeans and a white T-shirt with a V-neck pullover. When he laughed, something glinted in his mouth. His tongue was pierced.

"You one of those violent queers?" I asked.

Index laughed again. He appeared genuinely delighted by my charm. "No, not at all," he said. "Just a fan. And a businessman with an offer."

I raised my eyebrows in a gesture of cool offhandedness. Index offered to refill my glass, an offer I was disinclined to refuse.

"There's just not enough laughter in the world, is there, Mick?" he said. His eyes shone with an everlasting bright good humour. I nodded, I think a little spellbound, and he continued. He just sort of spilled it all out, and he had such a look in his eye that there was no way I was going to disbelieve *this* pitch.

"There are *comedians*, yes, *funny* men, but where are the real geniuses: the Bruces, the Pryors, the Cooks? Where are the sufferers, the tormented few who get their material from anguish, injustice and fury? The ones who watch over us?

"You see, Mick, there are more destructive powers in the world than there are constructive ones. Entropy is a dark, ever-widening eye that never ceases in its function to see all and disassemble it. So we have to close that eye a little, we have to throw a little salt in it, shine a little light in it; temporarily *blind* it, if you like. To give us a chance.

"And that's what you do. Life tried to cripple you and it failed and now you're laughing back at it, mocking it, getting under its skin. You stop things from falling apart. You are at war against despair.

"I can give you success if you work for me, great success. Because you're rare, Mick. Precious. And in return, you watch over us. Stirring stuff?"

"Stirring as bagpipes, motherfucker." I saluted him with my whisky glass, spilling a little. Index just laughed that jolly laugh, and I saw then, just for a second, that the stud in his tongue was in the form of a tiny little silver strawberry.

"Entropy has followers, Mick. The Autoscopes. So named because we see ourselves in them and despair. They turn their skills to dismantling creation. They are entropy and we have always fought them and we will always fight them until creation can be remade. Unless we fail; and there are so few of us left now.

"So we use what we can. We use people like you to keep them at bay. You are our Paladins. And we search for our own kind, reborn Firmament Surgeons, and try to find them before the Autoscopes can kill them.

"There are perhaps only one or two per fifty million people and somehow the Autoscopes seem able to detect them before we can. Children disappear, Mick. Now you know why.

"So. You work for me and I'll give you success. And in

return, when we locate a child, you find it and bring it to us before the Autoscopes can destroy it."

"And together we'll save the world," I said. "You're not a nonce, are you?"

Index virtually fell of his stool laughing at this one.

"They're not going to be able to touch you, Mick!" he roared. "You're too sharp."

I thought for a moment. "These *Paladins*," I said. "Don't they all die futile, friendless deaths?"

Index composed his features into such a serious expression, that for a moment I almost regretted my facetious remarks. "Only if they forget what they do best. If *they* start to despair, well, we're in terrible trouble, aren't we?"

Somehow, I bought it. Don't ask me to describe the moment I went over, I just did. What combination of predisposing factors, persuasion, timing and delivery converted me? Couldn't tell you, but it just seemed to sound right. When you've grown up the way I have, you can smell bullshit from space, and Index just didn't give off that aroma. So I agreed. On a trial basis. He'd make me a success and in return, well, I'd go rescue his little reborn Firmament Surgeons with a gun in my hand and a bitter repudiation of life's antic bliss on my lips.

This isn't my first job. Three months ago we rescued a little girl from an empty house on the Arbury estate in Cambridge. She's with Index at a safe house in East London. We haven't been able to locate her sister yet but we have some good men working on it Quayside.

There is a company of Autoscopes trying to get to Invidisham-next-the-Sea because there is a very special child here, a reborn Firmament Surgeon, and they intend to kill him. They are using the power of despair to fuel their incursion; they have tapped a rich vein here on this estate and are using the energy to turn the population into monsters and force a Gantry open from one of the Quays. Quays are places of safety but recently this vastly powerful group of Autoscopes has decimated a number of them in their search for this child. They seem extremely agitated about the whereabouts of this child and Index feels this might be because he has been reborn with the power to open up all the remaining Quays and bring about the Recreation.

They are hoping the monsters will cause disruption and leave the child vulnerable as he sleeps, easy pickings when they come through.

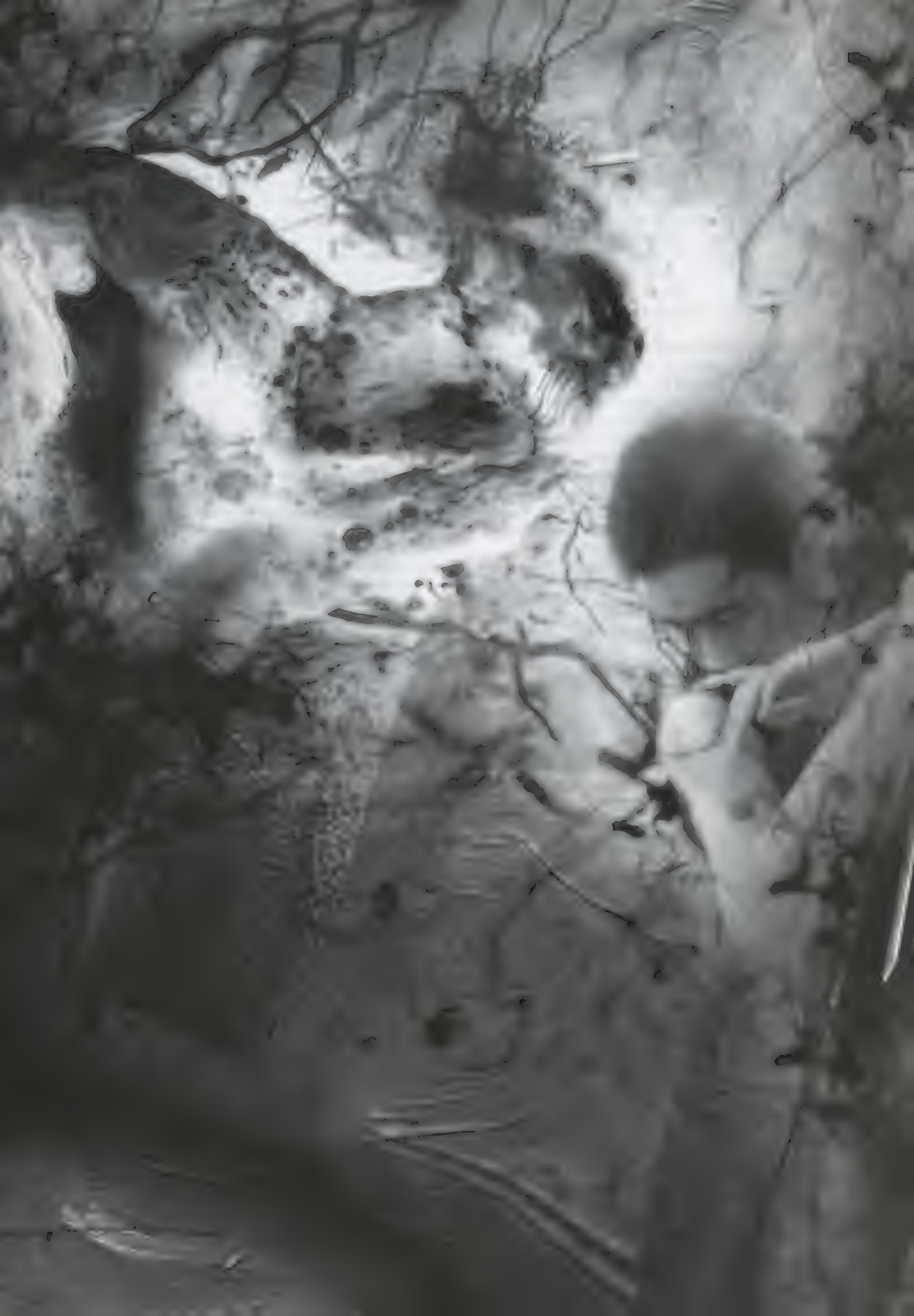
There is a wondrous symmetry to this job; Index tells me it's the reason I was chosen.

When we arrived on the estate the first thing we saw was the ambulance. It was on its side, lights still pulsing. Frank had slowed the Chevy and we'd seen the remains of the technicians spread around the cab. We'd followed the road and seen that little bloke swaying across the car park. The entire top of his head was lifting up and down with teeth. Looks like he was the first to turn.

I looked at Frank and shrugged. He gave me a reassuring grin and nodded. Everyone else was looking at me with blank, frowning, headachy looks. Well, they needed to know.

"So, we need more guns," said Frank, in vigorous and wholehearted support of my story. "Estates like this have got more guns than *prams*."

Julie had moved to the vacant stool next to Frank. She was eyeing his Magnum. "My boyfriend – well he's not really my *boy*friend – Jimmy's a drug dealer. I *think* he's got a gun." She smiled loosely at Frank. Frank turned and stared at her. He tipped the champagne bottle to his lips. It looked like he was inflating some sort of horrible, heavy



balloon. Julie paled and closed her legs.

"Phone him, get him here," said Frank. "Anyone else?"

Rory stepped forward. He made a conscious effort to stop wringing his hands. "There's an old boy living above me, an Afghan asylum seeker who moved in upstairs a couple of months ago. He's a member of a sort of gun-club that meets in a lock-up beneath one of the flyovers somewhere on the estate. I think they just sit round a gas fire and drink, but there might be a few rifles lying about. If he's in he could get them for us."

Frank nodded. "That's your job, Rors. Appropriate the rifles." He turned to Julie, who was talking into her mobile. She looked up and nodded. "I've told him to meet me in the car park. I told him someone from Thetford was up here trying to sell me crack."

Rory and Dean left the Macebearer by the back door, which led directly out onto the plaza. All the shops were closed and had their metal security screens pulled down. Only the Fish 'n' Chick'n was open for business over on the left, its window steamed up and streaming with condensation. Rory could make out the vague shape of Gavin Runs moving desultorily about behind the fryers. There were a couple of concrete tubs filled with vitiated soil and litter in the center of the square. Everything was coated with that ominous rusty sodium-glow endowed by the square's single streetlamp. Dean was actually holding onto the back of Rory's coat. "How pissed *are* you?" whispered Rory.

"Not enough," said Dean. "What are we *doing*?"

"You heard what Mick said. We need to arm ourselves."

They crossed the square and ducked into a stairwell. As they started up, they heard a sound from behind them. They clutched at each other and froze. They peered through a gap in the banister railings, their breath caught in their throats. "Oh, fuckin *hell,*" Dean moaned.

What sloped into the square had once been a man, surely; one could tell by the tracksuit bottoms. It came reeling in under the archway from the car park. It scraped the soles of its feet against the concrete in a lame, pigeon-toed shuffle. What had become of it above the waist was unendurable. Rory gagged.

They watched as the creature stepped into the amber light. It stood for a moment, swaying slightly, then seemed to sense activity to its left. It quivered. Slowly, it began to edge across the square towards the chip shop.

"We've got to do something, Rory!" Dean said. Rory was already on it. He had his mobile out and was punching in the phone number printed next to the sign above the chippy. The creature was picking up speed. It's feet scraped and dragged. It was navigating the concrete tubs.

"Come on, come *on*," Rory hissed. The creature paused. Something on its head turned in Rory's direction.

"Hello, Fish 'n' Chick'n?"

THE CREATURE MADE A SOUND, THE MOST UNLIKELY SOUND RORY HAD EVER HEARD. IT WAS LIKE SOMEONE PLUCKING THE RING PULL ON AN EMPTY CAN, A KIND OF HOLLOW, GLOTTAL PING, WHICH RORY FOUND UNIMAGINABLY DISTURBING

Rory and Dean froze. From where they squatted they could see the misty outline of Gavin talking into the telephone next to the counter.

"Hello?"

The creature began to move off again.

"Bye, wanker."

Rory's phone was cut off. He squeezed his eyes shut. Dialed again. No reply. He looked up and saw that Gavin had resumed his activities at the fryers. He was ignoring the ringing. "Ah, come on you fat twat, answer your fucking *phone*!"

The creature had reached the chip shop's glass door. Rory was holding his phone so tightly he heard the casing crack. Dean grabbed his arm, pulling the phone away from his ear.

"It's too late," he said.

The door was pushed inwards then swung shut behind the creature. They saw sudden movement and a muffled voice registering shock that swiftly modulated up the scale into terror. More movement as the creature launched itself over the counter. The condensation was able to mask the specifics, allowing only a glimpse of the encounter, however it did nothing to smother the sound of Gavin's final scream and the horrible thick splash and monstrous sizzling as he was upended and plunged head first into the open fryer.

"My *Christ*!" Dean put a hand over his mouth. His eyes bulged above his blanched, trembling fingers.

Rory slowly lowered his phone. He stood, pulling Dean up with him. "We've got to get Babur," he said, and started up the steps to the second floor walkway.

Nobody wanted to leave the Macebearer. I sat at the bar with Frank, smoking and drinking my Scotch. There were two young mums with a couple of kids sitting by the window. They had taken the news of our situation pretty well, considering the strangeness of it. Maybe growing up on an estate like this prepared you for the kind of knight's move that had just now come upon them. When threatened, make as small a target of yourself as possible and chain smoke. Textbook.

We'd put what furniture we could lift up against the doors and the window but it was pretty flimsy. Most of the place was nailed down.

We waited. Every now and then, something would shriek or bellow from somewhere within the depths of the estate. We heard the muffled thuds of distant explosions that sounded like a row of cars going up like a string of firecrackers. Something large ran across the far end of the car park, hopping and flapping great leathery wings in a fruitless attempt to get airborne. It hurtled into a rank of recycling bins and collapsed. A rectangular green bin trundled unhurriedly across the asphalt like an unconvincing assault vehicle sent on a reconnoiter. It nudged the bumper of a parked Fiesta, which gave a startled honk from its alarm then fell silent.

We heard the screech of tyres and headlights suddenly lit up the car park as a large white IVECO Transit van swung through the entrance. It bounced up a kerb and headed straight for the Macebearer on a diagonal course. Julie leapt from her stool. "It's Jimmy," she said, "open the door, quick!"

Frank and I pulled a fruit machine away from the door and stepped out. The van had stopped outside the pub. The driver-side door flew open and a young man dressed in casual sportswear and wearing a Burberry baseball cap, its peak fashioned into a steep arch down which a small, sallow, sadistic little face peered, jumped out and hurried around to the front of the vehicle. "He's got a shooter," said Frank from out the corner of his mouth. "Good boy."

Julie pushed between us and ran to Jimmy, but Jimmy was in the mood to discuss territory and registered disinterest by straight-arming her in the throat. She collapsed

to her knees, barking. Jimmy brought up his piece. It was a sawn-off shotgun. He waved it at us like an aid to detection. "Which one you chavs been pushin wash on my *bitch*?" Jimmy articulated.

Frank stepped forward as the gun swung back towards me. He closed a hand around Jimmy's wrist and wrenched it downwards. Jimmy screamed just loudly enough to cover up the sound of the bones splintering. He sagged, wide-eyed and breathing loudly through his mouth. Frank shook him by the wrist – causing Jimmy to black out – which allowed the gun to drop from his indigo fingers. Then Frank stepped forward, pressed the muzzle of his Magnum into Jimmy's armpit and pulled the trigger.

Rory and Dean went up to the third floor. They stepped out from the stairwell and Rory peered around the corner of the building and along the narrow walkway. There were three flats on this side, the middle one being Babur's. It was directly above Rory's flat.

They edged around the corner and slid along the wall until they reached Babur's front door. Rory held his breath, listening. Was the old benefit fraud still up here or had he already left to meet with the other immigrants that congregated outside the Albion Hotel on the front? All of them casting their famished eyes about with guarded opportunism, blue-chinned and illegal, with a lift-groper's pallor and a history of psychiatric assessments to bolster their applications. Further callous thoughts coasted through Rory's head as he lifted a hand and knocked.

As they stood together on the walkway waiting for a response from old Babur, Rory found himself thinking about his life. He was aware of Dean's mucid panting beside him and could discern the jabbing movement of his chin as he darted his head about in limitless agitation. Dean, who perpetrated all manner of indignities upon sundry birds he met in clubs, then recounted his exploits with indecorous tang to the nearest deaf ear. What stopped Dean from despairing? Utter lack of aspiration, perhaps. An almost immeasurable incapacity to allow the gloom and toxicity of his few blunted relationships to afford him a nugget of insight into the superficiality of his existence? Probably. *Cunt. I'm better than this*, thought Rory, and knocked again.

Frank walked around to the back of the van. "What's in the van, Gurgles?" he asked.

Jimmy opened his mouth, closed it. He was lying on his back in the road. His eyes were wide, staring. His hat had flipped off his head. "Maaah*faaah*," he said, eyes rolling, fixing on Frank. His upper arm, shoulder, and I should think a fair portion of his back, were gone. His mouth opened and I glimpsed a saliva bubble form between his lips, which glimmered momentarily, diaphanous and bronzed by the streetlight, trembled like a dragonfly's wing, then winked out of existence at the very same moment Jimmy did.

"He's gone, Frank," I said.

Frank hauled open the rear doors. "*Fuck*," he said. And the monster was on him.

Babur came to the door wearing slacks and a dirty grey vest. His braces hung in frayed loops from his waistband. He was barefooted and was carrying a box of Cornflakes. He eyed Rory and Dean with unconcealed mistrust. "What do you want?"

"Have you got any guns?" said Dean from behind Rory's left shoulder.

The pitbull hit the doors so hard they almost flew out of Frank's grip. He just had time to absorb the shock and reacted by pushing the doors back together, vicing the dog's head between them. He stood nose to nose with it as it fumed and thrashed, claws scrabbling on the metal bed of the van, exerting itself with an unhinged fury to attack. Its head was a blur, like some possessed angle-grinder straining to gnaw away its operator's face. I'd watched Frank prepare a joint of beef once by cutting slits in the thick, bloody muscle and pressing a fistful of garlic cloves into the gashes. That's what that dog's head looked like, battering itself earless against the sharp steel edges of the doors: like an enraged and gory joint, tumerous with great yellow cloves of teeth, animate with a mindless longing to *chew*.

I picked up Jimmy's shotgun and stepped round to where Frank was duelling with the dog. I could see that Frank was starting to sweat. There was a heat coming off the animal, like the inside of a tumble dryer halfway through its cycle; somehow damp yet arid simultaneously: sweat oozing beneath the short, greasy pelt and the offensive, dirt-grey stink of dog drool.

I shoved the barrels up between Frank's arms and was fortunate to find the sweet spot beneath the pitbull's jawbone, where the flesh is puppy soft and pouchy, at the first try. I thrust upwards, jamming the back of the dog's bony head into the narrow gap between the doors. Frank turned his head away.

"All I hear is gunshots, gunshots," said Babur. "Gunshots and screaming. It's like fucking Kabul down there."

Rory, Dean and Babur were all startled by the partially muffled blast of a large weapon. "That sounded like a shotgun," said Dean.

They peered over the low brick parapet that walled off the drop into the square. As they looked down, the door to the chip shop flew open and the creature that had killed Gavin came slithering out. It stopped and seemed to be listening. It appeared to be trying to ascertain the direction of the gunshot. "What the fuck is *that* bastard?" said Babur, horrified, and dropped his Cornflakes over the side. The box hit the ground and detonated in a spray of orange flakes.

The creature made a sound, the most unlikely sound Rory had ever heard. It was like someone plucking the ring pull on an empty can, a kind of hollow, glottal *ping*, which Rory found unimaginably disturbing. Then, with a shocking and quite horrible haste, the creature belted across the square and charged up the stairwell. "Oh, fuck *me*!" said Rory.

Rory and Dean bundled Babur back into his flat. Dean slammed the door and switched off the hall light.

"In here," said Babur, and led them into the kitchen. Through the window Rory could see fires burning in at least five different parts of the estate.

Babur closed the kitchen door. There was a small, formica-topped table in the middle of the room with a couple of unmatching chairs beneath it. There was a cup of black tea, a pudding bowl and a carton of UHT milk on the table with a copy of *The Independent* folded open at the cryptic crossword. Rory noticed that Babur had almost completed it. He looked up to see that Babur was watching him. "We're not all scroungers and idiots, you know," Babur said, narrowing his eyes.

Dean had opened the kitchen door and was peering down the hall. "I think it's outside," he said, then shrieked as the

creature instantly began flinging itself against the door, each shuddering crash accompanied by that unearthly, frantic *ping! ping! ping!*

"Shut the door, you prick," Babur said in a low tone. He opened a drawer beneath the worktop and pulled out a carving knife. There was a great splintering crash. Babur picked up the carving knife. He held it up and squinted along the length of the blade. He turned and looked at Rory, then at Dean. "Stay here," he said. Then he went to the kitchen door, pulled it open and stepped out into the hall.

"Think we'd better get inside," Frank said. He was wiping his face and neck with a bar towel.

"It's empty, Frank," I said. "Apart from what's left of the dog."

"Not the van. The pub. We'd better get inside the pub."

I looked up and caught the expression on his face. He nodded towards the car park. I turned to look. "Right," I said. Coming towards us from all sides of the car park were dozens of the creatures. And as they drew closer I began to hear the unnatural cacophony of sounds they made; groans and thuds, tinkles and rumbling eructations. Something was shouting a baroque torrent of dead languages and something else, towards the back of the crowd and maybe as big as a carthorse, made an explosive, splintering jangle with each step, like a lorry-load of harpsichords being unloaded over a balcony.

"Actually," Frank said, "*do* get in the van." He went round to the driver's side and climbed in. Jimmy had left the keys. Frank started the ignition while I climbed into the back. I was nearly thrown off my feet as Frank reversed the van in a tight semicircle. I held onto the back of the passenger seat as Frank steered the van beneath the narrow arched entrance to the square, effectively blocking it off. He switched off the ignition and pulled the handbrake high and tight. He indicated the rear doors with a jab of his thumb. I climbed out and walked into the square. Frank followed and we stood there for a moment, looking around.

"You sure the kid's here?" Frank asked.

"That's what Index said on the phone," I said. "He couldn't pinpoint the flat but was ninety-nine percent sure it was in this block."

Frank shook his head. "And Rory never knew a thing," he said. Then he frowned; someone had just fallen from the balcony over on our left. A carving knife glittered as it cartwheeled across the concrete.

Rory and Dean were both huddled behind the kitchen door. They heard Babur shout something in his native tongue, an oath precursive to engagement, and then there was the sound of a swift and frenzied encounter. Babur's voice was drowned beneath a deafening volley of hysterical *pings* and an odd *slumping* sound as a batch of oily tentacles unrolled across the plasterboard walls. Rory and Dean could hear a great deal of thrashing and pounding, punctuated by a systematic, brawny chopping sound.

"He's getting a pasting," Dean said, his eyes wide and appalled.

Rory nodded. He looked around the gloomy kitchen. "Quick," he said, "grab one of these." He slid a chair from under the table and pushed it at Dean. He took the other, a flimsy thing with a paint-spotted blue vinyl seat cushion, and lifted it up in front of his chest. He looked like a disastrously unaccomplished lion-tamer. "Come on, then," he said, a little wildly, pushed past Dean and threw open the kitchen door.

I looked up. A figure was peering over the side of the second floor balcony. He was wearing a vest and appeared to be covered in blood. He looked like he was about to say something, and then I saw my brother and his mate come piling out of the flat behind him carrying furniture.

"What were you going to do, sit and watch?" the old guy barked.

Rory, Dean and Babur came down to the plaza and they all stood looking down at the body. "How the fuck did you do that?" asked Dean, an incredulous look on his face.

Babur wiped his brow on a hairy forearm. He appeared totally unharmed. "Element of surprise," he said. He walked off and retrieved his knife.

"I don't think there are any more guns," said Rory. He jumped as something threw itself against the front of the Transit van making it rock on its axles. He felt deflated, nervy and exhausted.

"Here," said Frank, and tossed him the shotgun. He took a box of shells from his pocket and lobbed them as well. "In the glove box," he said.

Rory caught the shotgun in his arms but fumbled the shells. He bent to pick them up and, as he did so, unintentionally discharged the second of the shotgun's barrels.

"Fuck me, Rory, mind what you're doing!" yelled Mick.

There was a rambunctious, orotund sound – like a large glass bottle half full of overripe matter rolling in an arc across a marble floor. Frank was looking at Dean with a sickened look on his face. Rory turned slowly, his eyes wide, horrified at what he must have done.

"You've *shit* yourself!" said Frank.

Dean darted his eyes from one face to another. "No I haven't," he lied.

Babur and Frank went over to the transit. Frank opened the back doors and they both climbed in. From where I stood beneath the streetlamp I could see them both talking and looking out through the windscreen at what was happening in the car park. The van occasionally trembled or rocked but otherwise remained firm. Dean had crept gingerly back into the Macebearer.

I turned to Rory. "There's some more stuff I've got to tell you, Rors," I said. Rory looked shot to pieces but I had information he needed to hear. I thought he could probably take it. I mean, it was kind of *happy* news. He was looking around the square like he was trying to remember where he'd parked his bike. He turned to me.

"Not more weird shit, Mick. That other stuff, that

SOMETHING ELSE WAS FORCING ITS WAY THROUGH. LIGHT WAS SMOKING UPWARDS, LENGTHENING THE BREACH AND A FIGURE STEPPED OUT INTO THE SQUARE. IT STOOD LIKE A GUNSLINGER, ARMS BY ITS SIDE

Firmament Surgeon stuff, it makes my head ache."

"Not weird, Rory," I said. "*Surprising*. But not weird."

Frank climbed down from the back of the van. He looked unimpressed. "They're not all that," he said. "There's a few big boys out there, but they're mostly blundering about. Some of the others have made a few cracks in the windscreen but they're pretty ineffectual. Must be Dupes."

I nodded. The creatures were spawned from a lousy

stock; they weren't suddenly going to discover might and vitality just by being transformed into externalised versions of their own sleaze and fear. Their sole purpose was to frighten and distract. Nasty trick, but we were onto them.

It was what they heralded that bothered me.

Already the streetlamp was dimming and a quality of the air was making our voices sound flat and muffled. My ears felt full of wax.

"Right, Rory. Your place?"

Rory looked baffled, then he seemed to come to a little. "Yeah," he said. "Come up."

We went up a flight of steps and along the walkway to Rory's flat. He opened the front door and we went in. We entered the lounge and the first thing I saw was a large black and white poster in a clip frame over the fireplace. Jean Harlow in all her brassy allure.

"Still digging that chick?" I said.

"Still digging that chick," Rory replied with a wan smile.

I stood in front of the poster, my hands behind my back. I pursed my lips and tilted my head to one side. "Never fancied her, myself," I said.

Rory shrugged.

"You've got a little boy, Rory," I told him. "He's three."

"My God," said Rory. "My God. I should have known. I mean, I should have *guessed*. I should at least have – " He sat down heavily on the sofa and raised his hands. "It was only once, but – "

"Once is sufficient, Rory," Mick said.

Rory felt numb. He thought this must be what it was like to be told you had cancer. No, he couldn't say that. That was a terrible thing to think. He looked around his living room trying to focus on something unthreatening, something to ground him. Little dots of light floated behind his eyes. Mick sat down next to him. "Breathe, Rory," he said.

Rory gasped and looked up at Jean Harlow. Somehow he expected something surreal to happen, something of the David Lynch stripe; the boundaries of the poster would begin to flow out from the edges of the clip frame like a dark aura and Jean would step out of her compressed limbo, all sun-fade and smoke, and begin to sing in a child's voice "Saratoga, Saratoga, Saratogaaaa – "

"Gaaaa," said Rory.

"That's it, Rory, you breathe now," said Mick.

Rory looked around and saw his brother sitting on the sofa next to him. His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes. "She used to come into the shop. She was all tits and tops-of-the-arms. Brown, freckly, you know. She had these two awful kids with her, Brandon and Jordan. Both different colours. One evening she was hanging about by the trolleys and asked me to go for a drink. I thought why not, so we did and I ended up back at hers. I don't even remember giving her one, Mick, not really. Then she stops coming into the shop and blanks me on the stairs and then a while later I see her with a pram and those two kids and think, stupid tart's got herself up the stick again, how fucking irresponsible. I never thought for a minute. Are you sure, Mick? Really sure?"

Mick nodded. "Do they still live here?"

"They live opposite. Number eighteen. He's a lovely little boy, Mick. His name's Alex. He gets a terrible time off those brothers. He's going to be a wreck. The oldest one's got an Anti-Social Behavioural Order on him already." Rory looked up at his poster again with tearful eyes, and Mick thought he recognised that look from a long time ago.

"No, he's not, Rory. He's the child we've come for. He's the reborn Firmament Surgeon."

Rory shook his head. "What? Mick. *Mick*. I can't really believe that shit. Not really." There was the sound of a scream and a gunshot from outside. Rory nearly leapt off the sofa.

"Believe the rest of it, though, Rory. You believe what you've already seen. Just trust me on the rest."

Rory stared at the floor for a moment, then sighed. He stood up and picked up his shotgun. "You'd better show me how to load this," he said.

As they came out of Rory's flat they noticed immediately that the light was different. They looked down into the square and saw the cause. Above the concrete tubs in the middle of the plaza, a thin golden thread had appeared in the air. The Gantry was being forced open.

"The Autoscopes are coming," said Mick.

He saw Frank drop to one knee and fire into the Gantry. Something bellowed and for a second the strip of cold, golden light pulsed and receded to a mere filament suspended in the air. Then it began to rend again, and Mick fancied he could hear the fragile fabric between the dimensions popping like bubble-wrap as atoms split off on their exotic traceries.

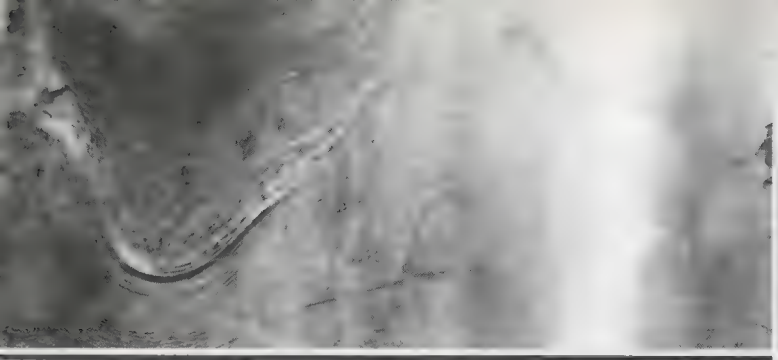
He nudged Rory and they ducked along the walkway. They turned right at the end and skirted round until they came to number eighteen. Lights were on and they could both hear noises coming from inside. They looked at each other and nodded. Mick straightened up, lifted his gun and kicked the door off its hinges.

Frank fired again. Babur had climbed down from the back of the van and was standing at Frank's side twirling the carving knife in his fingers by the tip of the blade. Golden light strobed off the stainless steel; Babur flipped the knife, snatched the handle and hurled it underarm towards the gap in the air. There was an unearthly howl of agony and something large and dark reared up, blocking the light, then fell backwards taking Babur's knife with it, embedded in a great, glaring, murderous eye.

Something else was forcing its way through. Light was smoking upwards, lengthening the breach and a figure stepped out into the square. It stood like a gunslinger, arms by its side, face obscured by long, fair hair. It wore a black coat with tails cut to resemble the carapace of a beetle.

Frank turned to Babur. "The Coleopterist," he said. "Index mentioned him." He began to walk backwards towards the van. He raised his Magnum and pumped a couple of rounds into the figure. The creature jolted but remained standing. It lifted its head and peered out from beneath its fringe with a high bank of tiny, glittering eyes. It hissed and a green, venomous fluid frothed from pinhole ducts beneath the eyes. It pulled its shoulders back and shot its cuffs and at once a torrent of cockroaches poured from its sleeves and clattered to the concrete like a hellish conjuring trick. The insects fanned out; some took off on slick, papery wings and swirled around in the golden light, rattling and colliding with each other.

The insects continued to cascade from the Coleopterist's sleeves as if the creature standing in the middle of the square were nothing more than a bottomless tank of filth, siphoning these awful bugs up from some great swarming chasm within it.



THE CREATURE'S HEAD DISINTEGRATED IN A FINE SPRAY, FANNING THE KITCHEN DOOR WITH A COATING OF GREENISH MUCK. ITS LONG NECK BUCKED LIKE A WHIPCORD AND THE CREATURE SLUMPED FORWARD ONTO ITS KNEES LIKE A SLAUGHTERHOUSE STEER. THE STUMP OF NECK FARTED A THICK BUBBLE OF AIR, THRASHED ONCE THEN LAY STILL.

And behind it, something else was pushing through the Gantry. Something vast.

Mick and Rory edged up the hallway of number eighteen. They could hear sounds coming from the bedrooms at the back of the flat. If Rory remembered correctly, the two boys bunked in one room. The little one must have been forced in with them. Rory felt an enervating surge of sudden and overwhelming concern course through him. He felt totally disarmed as the new emotions began to harden into anger. He began to like the feel of the shotgun in his hands. Those little mistreating shits. My son. *My* son. My *son*.

Rory walked into Mick and nearly dropped the shotgun. Mick rounded on him, glaring. "Keep it together Rors, yes?" he said. Rory nodded.

They reached the end of the hall. There were three doors. Mick turned and gave Rory a questioning look.

"I don't know," Rory said. "I think we did it on the settee."

Mick took hold of the door handle on his right. "Ready?"

Rory nodded. Mick opened the door.

They both recoiled as something horrible sluiced out at them on a thick, phlegmy tide of matter.

"Sharon?" Rory said.

Mick knelt down to have a closer look. He breathed in a mouthful of air that smelt of cloves and onions and grease. It lay in a pool of glossy liquid, sagging on its flank. Between his parted knees a large grey cylinder peered up at him with cloudy, baked-looking eyes. The torso was a slab from which vestigial limbs protruded. Mick looked up at Rory. "*Sharon*?" he said.

Rory was staring down at the monster. "She's seen better days," he said, then brayed a loud and uncontrollable volley of feral laughter. He clapped a hand over his mouth.

Something hit the door to their left hard enough to burst a screw out of the top hinge. Mick stepped back in time to avoid being showered with chipboard fragments as the door exploded. He raised an arm to cover his face and when he lowered it something utterly fearsome was standing in the hall before him, billowing and shining like tarpaulin.

Mick bundled into Rory and they both fell backwards. Mick dropped his gun and watched with anguish as it came down on its muzzle and sprang rascally beneath the creature's trembling forelimbs. It lowered its head and bellowed a great blast of snot and steam down the hall at them.

The sitting room door opened behind them and they wheeled round. The muscles in Rory's face were trembling. "Oh, what's going down?" he said.

Another creature had emerged from the room behind them. It had no face, no features; it was a tremulous block of pinkish, rugose flesh, and as they watched, it unhinged a cruel fan of fitments from its flank and began to slide up the hall towards them.

Mick reached round and grabbed Rory's shotgun. He span and faced the thing standing in front of the kitchen door. It fixed stalk-eyes on him and switched its mantis head to the side. "Who am I killing?" Mick said over his shoulder. "I like to know."

Rory's voice was loud in Mick's ear. "I think that's Brandon. He was always a beady-eyed little fuck."

"Excellent," said Mick and gave Brandon both barrels.

The creature's head disintegrated in a fine spray, fanning the kitchen door with a coating of greenish muck. Its long neck bucked like a whipcord and the creature slumped forward onto its knees like a slaughterhouse steer. The stump of neck farted a thick bubble of air, thrashed once then lay still.

Mick and Rory ran past the body of the Brandon-creature

and crashed into the kitchen. "You'll always find me in the kitchen at carnage," sang Rory. He had that riotous look back in his eyes.

Suddenly a collection of lethal-looking biomechanical tines slid through between the door and its frame. Rory leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding being speared through the side. Mick lifted the shotgun and brought the stock down onto the jabbing tines with enough force to bend them and actually snap a couple off. The creature made a quivering, wallowing sound and tried to withdraw the crooked spokes. Mick hit them again and effectively fastened the thing to the other side of the door.

"Bollocks to this," Mick said. He reloaded the shotgun and took a step back. He raised the shotgun to waist height and blasted the door from about two feet away.

Smoke hung about them like fog. Rory coughed and waved the smoke away with his hand. There was a hole in the door big enough to climb through. Splinters like scorched fangs rimmed the hole and both men went up to it and peered through. The hall was coated in a lumpy pink layer of smouldering blancmange. "Jordan?" asked Mick.

"I imagine so," said Rory.

"Fat little bastard?"

"How'd you guess?"

They heard a sound behind them and both span round. It had been a sob.

I let Rory investigate the sound. He went over to the corner of the room and squatted to look beneath the kitchen table.

"Oh, hi," he said, sounding a little choked, "Hi. Come on, it's OK. It's OK. Let me pick you up." He turned his head and looked at me, eyes full of sorrow. "They've got him sleeping in a *dog basket*, the bastards. Come on, now, Alex. It'll be all right."

He reached under the table and emerged with a small boy in his arms. The child was white faced and hung in Rory's arms like a soft toy. He had dark smudges beneath his eyes. He was dressed in a grubby white T-shirt and knee-length orange shorts with green piping around the waist. His feet were black with grime. He stared into Rory's face with a strange, still serenity. Then he threw his arms around Rory's neck, hooked his legs around his middle and buried his head in his chest. Rory grunted and staggered back a step but hung on. He carried the child over to me. He was grinning. "Mick, Alex. Alex, Mick."

I reached out and ruffled his hair a little in a way I imagined an uncle might. Alex was already asleep.

We came back out onto the walkway and could see that the Gantry had widened considerably. It was now a blazing yellow fissure through which something colossal was attempting to pass. As we watched, more of the creature strained its way through the Gantry, and legs, segmented and bristling with hairs, slid through and came down onto the concrete with a scrabbling, scratching sound. The air around the Gantry was swarming with huge bugs and I could sense more of them milling and clicking in the darkness of the doorways and stairwells around the perimeter of the square. A figure in a long black coat stood in front of the Gantry and I saw hundreds of those bugs well up from out of its coat, pour over its collar and race down its back. The Coleopterist had arrived.

I could see Frank and Babur with their backs to the Transit van. Frank was trying to force a fresh clip into his gun.

We ran along the walkway and down the stairs. We came out on Frank's right, crushing dozens of roaches beneath our feet. They split like ice-cream cones and long buttery strings of innards clung to our shoes as we executed a series of squeamish leaps over them. Frank saw us and palmed the clip home. He gestured to us to stay back.

We were close, though, and I could see a vertical line of eyes glistening along the foremost lobe of the monster's torso; they were as golden as the light from the Gantry and blazed with a terrible alien wrath. It must have seen – or sensed – Rory's child, and it increased its efforts to come through. It moaned and whined with fury and exertion and behind it, still contained within the Gantry, I could hear the desperate cries of other Autoscopes as they too felt the proximity of the child.

"Take him inside, Rory," I said. Rory was rigid with fear but I elbowed him and he tottered into the Macebearer with an ailing expression on his face, Alex held tightly in his arms.

I was about to go over to Frank and Babur but before I could move something came out of the Gantry – some kind of thick, serrated appendage – and sideswiped Babur. It sent him sprawling across the plaza in a welter of blood. He pitched onto his side and rolled into the doorway of Hurrell's Bakers. I stopped, stunned. Frank ducked as the tentacle swept back over his head. He fired off a couple of rounds and then sprang up into the back of the Transit van.

A moment later the engine roared. The Coleopterist jerked its head as if waking from a trance. It made to follow Frank into the back of the van but before it could reach the open doors, the vehicle reversed into it, hitting it just above the knees. It flew forwards and sprawled onto the floor of the van.

Frank kept reversing. The van shot backwards and I caught sight of him through the passenger side window, looking over his shoulder and steering with his right hand on the wheel, left arm over the back of the seat. I heard muffled gunshots and the legs that were hanging out of the back of the van began to tremble. One of its boots was shaken loose and a torrent of bugs poured out of it the second it hit the ground.

The creature emerging from the Gantry was thrashing violently, its awful insect legs flogging against the concrete. It rose up and I could see a pale, distended thorax pushing at the bottom of the slit in the air, pressing it wider, swelling with effort to be born. And then the van slammed into it and its entire head and upper body were driven through the open rear doors and right up into the cargo area. The creature roared and lifted the vehicle off the ground. Its legs beat against the side panels and one of those serrated tentacles writhed across the roof, peeling up coils of metal like a can-opener.

THE CREATURE WAS REARING UP, HALF OF IT STILL WEDGED IN THE GANTRY, THE HEAD END JAMMED INTO THE BACK OF THE VAN ALL FOUR WHEELS WERE OFF THE GROUND AND THE CREATURE WAS SHAKING IT LIKE A DOG

It smashed the van back down. The windscreen blew out with a sound like a shelf full of wineglasses collapsing. The passenger door sprang open. Frank slid out and rolled. He came up and ran across the plaza. He reached me, snatched the shotgun out of my hands, winked – the fucker *winked* – then ran back towards the van.

The creature was rearing up, half of it still wedged in the Gantry, the head end jammed into the back of the van. All

four wheels were off the ground and the creature was shaking it like a dog trying to shake off a muzzle. The sides of the van buckled and gonged.

Frank lifted the shotgun. As the van rose up again, revealing the dark, channelled underside, he fired both barrels into the fuel tank. Petrol burst from the ruptured tank. Frank ducked beneath the van and ran towards the opposite stairwell. I lost sight of him for a moment as the van crashed down into the widening pool of petrol, then he was visible again as the creature threw itself back against the edge of the Gantry, taking the van up with it. Frank had pulled out his Zippo. He flipped the lid, thumbed the wheel and lobbed the lighter beneath the cascade of fuel.

The van exploded.

The concussion hurled Frank off his feet. It blew out every window overlooking the square. The wide plate glass pane at the front of the *VAL-YOU!* Bargain Mart imploded showering the checkouts with a gale of shards. An oily brown fireball rolled up through the chimney made by the four facing walls of the plaza. I threw myself into a stairwell, kicking up a storm of those big, greasy bugs.

I looked around the corner and squinted through the rippling, turbulent air. The creature was thrashing in the silent heat of the burning van. Its legs had been reduced to carbon stumps and that jagged tentacle had shrivelled to a charred cable that lashed like a downed powerline with the movement of the creature's body. All I could hear was that blunt, baking roar of the flames.

I saw movement through the haze at the entrance to the square. I thought it was Frank but of course, now the van was out of the way, the creatures from the car park were venturing in.

Then I did see Frank. He was hobbling out of the smoke on what looked like a broken leg. As he came around past the entrance, something with a wide scarlet mouth came bounding towards him. He swung the shotgun and batted it away like a cricketer rolling his wrists down the leg side. The creature folded up and tumbled into the flames. I ran over to Frank and half carried him towards the Macebearer. His face was scorched and most of his hair above the brow was little more than stubble. His eyes were puffy and red and his lips were dotted with large, taut-looking blisters.

He grunted and leaned against me. As we reached the door to the Macebearer, we heard the van come down hard against the concrete. We turned, Frank hop-shuffling round in my arms.

The creature had collapsed. Half of it had broken off where it joined the Gantry like a chunk of hot ash slumping from the end of a huge cigar. What remained was still encased within the blackened frame of the van. As we watched, the Gantry began to narrow. A small amount of that wintry golden light still flickered around its edges but it was weakening. The Gantry was closing.

More of the creatures had come onto the plaza and these seemed to be disorientated and mystified by the waning Gantry. I saw one of them, an alarming looking thing with a bleary Cyclops eye the size of a bullseye window, just topple over onto its back in what was effectively a dead faint.

I helped Frank to turn on his good leg and we went in.

They limped up the corridor and went through into the main bar. Mick could see Rory sitting in a booth holding the sleeping child in his arms. Rory looked close to exhaustion. Everyone else was at the window, peering out over the make-shift barricade of chairs and benches. Dean had his forehead pressed to the glass.

"They're leaving," he said, and a large, white nebula of condensed breath bloomed over his head like an empty thought bubble. How apt, thought Mick.

Frank propped himself against a bar stool. "Here," he said and tossed his keys to Mick. "Get the Chevy and we're out of here."

Mick caught the keys and went over to the doors. He shouldered the fruit machine out of the way again and stepped out into the car park. He took a deep breath and tasted engine oil and burning petrol. The monsters had all filed up through the entrance to the plaza, drawn there by what remained of the Gantry.

Mick turned right and jogged past the entrance. He glanced through the arch and saw that the van was just a smoking grey steel cage. The monsters surrounded it. Something with a throat like a bullfrog had gone too close and had fused its air sac to the side of the van. It bounded feverishly back and forth connected to the superheated panel by an ever-lengthening rope of melting flesh.

Mick reached the Chevy and climbed in. He started her up and drove back across the car park until he was outside the Macebearer. Only then did he turn on the headlamps.

The Macebearer's doors swung open and Rory stumbled out. He opened the passenger side door and handed Alex to Mick. "Hang on," he said, and returned to the pub. He came back out a minute later with Frank leaning against him. They went around to the back of the flatbed and managed to get Frank over the tailgate and onto the floor. He looked up at Mick and grinned. Gave him a nod.

Rory came round and got in beside Mick. He took Alex from him and buckled up. "No one else wanted to come," Rory said. He didn't look surprised.

"Looks like you got out, Rors," said Mick.

"Got a bit of glamour in my life," he said with a slight, not-quite-confident smile. He looked wonderingly down at the sleeping boy.

Mick knocked the Chevy into first and they drove away.

I used to say to audiences that I did comedy in order to explore my sociopathic tendencies within a legitimised framework. This is partly true.

However, I now have a greater commission. Index tells me to keep my stuff surreal and extraordinary. That way the dark energies behind everything can't get a grip and do their unmaking. They hate our laughter because laughter is light. And in it there is no darkness at all.

There may not be pandas in East Anglia, but everything else I've told you is true.

Rory was almost asleep.

For about the hundredth time he looked down at the child in his arms. The interior of the Chevy was warm and quiet, lit only by the glow from the dashboard instruments. Mick was holding the Chevy at a steady seventy all the way down the M11 to London.

Rory smiled. As his eyes closed, he whispered some words to Alex, words that sounded a little bit alike.

One of them was *Dartford*.

The others were *Jean Harlow*.

Paul published his first story, 'The Last Great Paladin of Idle Conceit', in TTA14 and he has appeared in these pages a few times since, most recently in TTA40 with the incredibly well received and influential 'Black Static'. Paul lives in Cambridge.

Penny decides she doesn't want to direct it, so the co-producers find someone who does – Richard Loncraine, who, by happy coincidence, I'd worked with on Gothic before Ken Russell took over

One thing annoying to a professional screenwriter is to hear the herberts of *Empire* magazine and the like talk glibly about 'Development Hell' as if they know what they're talking about. To me, they're like the 'nudge nudge, wink wink' man in Monty Python who talks like a man of the world about sex, but in the end reveals his true self by saying plaintively: "What's it like?" Unless you've been there and done it, and had your soul eviscerated by the system, pontificate all you like in *Variety*-speak, but I'm not listening.

First off, Development Hell isn't Hell. In Hell, at least you know where you are. Development is Purgatory.

In deference to Robert Shaw in *Jaws*, let me show you some of my wounds.

In the early nineties I pitched a story to a producer in LA who told me to pitch it to his mate heading Paramount in London. I did, and they commissioned the script. The London office closed, the LA producer took the script to Columbia, and lo and behold five years down the line I have five different producers in the room – two of whom are not talking to each other because they're in the process of dissolving their partnership. So I do about twenty drafts, some set in London, some set in Boston: I do what they ask me to do. They love it, they tell me they're gonna make it. They hate it. It's in turnaround with $800,000 worth of studio costs against it, which means nobody will touch it – it's dead. Ten years work. Unsalvageable.

You keep spinning those plates. Sometimes they crash to the ground.

Then there's 'Slow Death by Enthusiasm'. Again about 1990, British director (helmer? No, please) Stuart Orme came to me with the notion of a TV series based on modernising Fairy Tales. I didn't like that, but I did like the book by Bruno Bettelheim he gave me: a psychoanalysist's take on the subject. I wrote a treatment about an elderly psychologist trying to solve the mystery of a feral boy found in the streets of New York. My US agent punted it round and sold it to Parkway Productions in LA for Penny Marshall (*Big*, *Awakenings*) as producer/director – and Stuart nobly took a back seat. Six years of research and a dozen drafts later, Penny decides she doesn't want to direct it, so the co-producers find someone who does – Richard Loncraine, who, by happy coincidence, I'd worked with on *Gothic* before Ken Russell took over. A year later Loncraine, coming off his *Richard III*, didn't want to do it "on the cheap" for under $20 million, so now, fifteen years later, I'm working with a new young *fourth* director, Nick Brandt. We've attracted Michael Caine to play the lead and have Danny de Vito and Kristen Scott Thomas signed up too. But even with that cast, we're 15% short on the $20 million budget. And so it goes.

But, as a producer once told me, "If it's moving it proves it's not dead." And any idea or script worth its salt can have the dust blown off it and be re-circulated. The lesson is: never, ever give up. As Steven Soderberg said:

talent + perseverance = luck.

My script *Telepathy*, about Soviet ESP experiments, is getting good reactions now, after being stuck in the mire of a German production company through the eighties who wanted to turn it into *Alien* (which it wasn't). I got it back and rewrote it the way I wanted it, fell in love with it all over again, and gave it to Lesley Manning, who directed *Ghostwatch*. I think it works ten times better now (I'm a better writer fifteen years on, I hope) and maybe we can make it our way, in Europe. Who knows?

Again back in the 80's I wrote *Superstition*, a screenplay based on the true story of Carole Compton, a Scottish nanny accused of witchcraft and imprisoned in Italy for attempted murder in 1984. I researched it from scratch, met Carole, discussed it with directors such as Danny Boyle and Mike Hodges, but ultimately the producers wanted to turn it into a supernatural thriller (which it wasn't), so we parted company. It was rewritten by several other people and directed by someone I've never heard of. I got the DVD on Amazon and my name is mis-spelled on the cover.

So why the tales of woe, not just from me, but from every screenwriter I know?

Once I met the TriStar exec who greenlit a film I co-wrote, *The Kiss*, he said: "You know, the film we made wasn't as good as that first draft you wrote." To which I thought: *why?*

ELECTRIC DARKNESS IN PURGATORY

The reason, quite simply, is that script development is not an exact science.

The best way to create films, in my experience, is to have three people in the room: the writer, the producer, and the director.

I don't know the worst way, but as Bill Cosby said, "I don't know the secret of success, but I know the secret of failure: you listen to everybody." I totally agree.

But you've got to listen to *somebody*. And what do you do with what you hear?

This is the essence of what makes a good, not just successful but good, screenwriter. Taking forty pages of notes of each draft and getting over that sick feeling in the pit of your stomach. Accommodating the self-contradictory directives from the Logic Nazis, and surviving. Sometimes. Other times, heart-wrenchingly, you end up plugging so many holes in the hull of the boat it's all plugs and no boat. And you hate your work even before they do.

The honest truth is that sometimes you don't know if the script is getting better or worse. Not that you're surrounded by sycophants, but nobody wants to believe they're wasting their time or taking a step backwards and it's only years later it becomes glaringly obvious they should have shot draft seven and not draft nineteen.

Script editors and development execs are a mixed blessing to put it mildly. I'm not sure where they come from. In England, usually publishing or an Eng Lit degree. In the US, lawyers or nepotism or both. They basically exist because producers don't have time to read (and, old joke, when they do their lips move). But D-girls and boys at the very least should have the overview to know if a project is going creatively off the rails. Truth is, they're more often instrumental in the train crash.

Needless to say I've worked with good development people and bad.

The good have a delightful knack of make you think you've improved it all on your own. They draw out of you what you mean, clarify your intentions and help forge what you want to achieve. It seems obvious, but they provide the sounding board to make it better than you thought possible. The bad ones make you feel you've had your homework marked.

They're anal retentive, analysing everything out of existence, ripping out the nuances that give it life and edge – and the worst of it is, get this, they want to be writers themselves. Sometimes their notes are perfectly rational – that's the killer – you can do it, it's only your heart and soul that knows they are wrong. And as time ensues you get that awful feeling that, though they say they want to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, all you see in front of you is bathwater. Where's the baby?

I don't believe the present received wisdom in the industry that we need to train more script editors. Because more who are useless are no good to anybody: we will just get the usual tranche of tedious British flicks we always get. Eng Lit movies. Librarian pictures.

Superstition was rewritten by several other people and directed by someone I've never heard of. I got the DVD on Amazon and my name is mis-spelled on the cover

Because let's not beat around the bush, these girls, and they are mostly girls, don't like Horror and Science Fiction. With notable exceptions like Lizzie Franke at Ministry of Fear, they literally curl up their notes at it. Even when they're bosses tell them to find genre material they say, "I don't really watch those films myself."

In what other industry would that make any sense whatsoever? A person who knows nothing about cars supervising the design of a car?

So, forgive me if I don't find the jokes about Development Hell funny. The screenwriter has been the nigger of industry too long.

The fact is that, without writers, nobody gets up for work.

The world is merciless. It's tempting to crumble, often. Not least because we care. David Puttnam says if you haven't cried alone in a hotel room you haven't been to Hollywood. But remember, what matters is not the game, but the work. The film, not everything that happens round the film.

What's important, as David Lynch says to remember, is the doughnut, not the hole.

Stephen Volk has written a new six-part drama series, *Afterlife*, starring Lesley Sharp and Andrew Lincoln, which will be screened on ITV1 in the autumn. He is also writing *The Interpretation of Ghosts* for BBC Films.

THE WORD "MERMAID" WRITTEN

BY DOUG LAIN

illustrations by chris· nurse

The three by five index cards feel good in my hand. I
POOL with a Sharpie and then toss the card into the ch
the middle. Watching it float there, feeling sweat ris
moment of peace. A moment, and then I dive in after th

ON AN INDEX CARD

write the words SWIMMING
lorinated water, aiming for
e up on my neck, I have a
e word.

Getting the Navy shrink to believe me was easy. All I had to do was imitate a television set. Just flip from one subject to the next, without transitions, every thirty seconds, and the I was officially crazy – schizotypal with manic and suicidal ideation.

In the middle of the pool I've got the card in my hand, more proof of my disorder, and I can't decide if I feel more like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* or Ric Ocasek in The Cars video for the song 'Magic'. You know the one where Ocasek imitates Christ by walking on chlorinated water while girls in neon bikinis jump in after him, splashing and smiling and sinking away?

I'm holding my breath. I've been at the bottom of the pool for over a minute and I'm looking at the filtration duct, wondering if I could jam my foot in and get stuck. The water is blue, like toilet bowl water, and the sky is clear and beautiful like a Sunkist commercial. I need to breathe. I need a drink even more.

Heaving myself up and over the edge, spread out on the concrete and watching the droplets evaporate, I reach for my bottle. It's whisky – single barrel whisky from my mother's liquor cabinet. I put my finger in the neck, and then roll back into the water. At the bottom I take my finger out and thrust the bottle to my lips, but I can't drink and hold my breath and the same time.

Determined, I breathe in chlorinated whisky, watch a cloud of brown come coughing out of my mouth, and then rise to the surface involuntarily.

Jam the foot first, then drink the whisky! I can never get the sequence right. Everything I try is always out of order.

On the concrete again I try to rearrange everything in my head.

Am I here because of the Navy, because I couldn't hack basic training? Am I here because of Dad and all of the different things he couldn't hack? Or am I here for some other, undefined, reason?

My mother doesn't want to leave me alone, she takes me along with her everywhere.

Today we're looking at Island property even though my father already bought the condo we're living in. I guess it feels strange to her, controlling the money, so she's just falling back on old habits. Not even her own habits, but Dad's.

Dad was always hunting for another good investment, never satisfied with what he had.

This Condo is brand new and full of high tech conveniences. A few buttons control the lights, home entertainment center, ice machine, and Jacuzzi, and the walls are made of cold, artificial stone. The lights are multicolored and the realtor has the living room set to aquamarine, the color of pebbles in a fish tank. The home entertainment center is playing 'Classical Gas' over and over as the salesman gives Mom his best pitch.

"There are plans for new development. This will be the cultural district in two years," he says. "We've already sold ten units here. It's a sound investment."

"Seven hundred is steep. Is that what people have been paying?"

I leave the living room, drag my fingers along the stucco wall of the hallway, and head to the bedrooms. I admire the interior decorating.

They've furnished this Condo with fictional lives: knick-knacks and postcards, bookshelves full of popular

hardbacks with colorful sleeves. Each bedroom clearly reflects the sensibility of its pretend occupant. The bedspread in the second bedroom shows Luke Skywalker and Bobbafett, and the master bedroom has a copy of Jonathan Livingston Seagull open on the pillow.

The pretend family that lives in this newly constructed condo unit is not only exceptionally neat, but also unstuck in time.

"Are all of your prospective buyers elderly baby boomers, or is this setup just for Mom?" I ask the realtor.

"What?"

"I noticed the Transformer Action Figures in the kid's room. All the toys are straight out of 1983."

The Realty Company contracted out to a company called Life Designs.

"They specialize in pseudo-environments and corporate space development for high stakes development projects," the salesman tells me. But it's all by rote and he clearly doesn't want to pursue the subject. He's focused on my mother, on reiterating square footage and amenities as she drinks the complimentary coffee from a plastic disposable cup. She's flipping a packet of non-dairy powder back and forth and stretching her legs under the glass table. "The furnishings are optionally included," he tells her.

"Even the Transformer Action Figures?" I ask. I've got my right hand buried in the flower display on the entryway table. I'm waiting by the door and fondling the glass beads in the vase.

"Don't do that," the realtor says.

I move my hand back and forth, rattling the beads inside the vase.

"The beads are not complimentary," he says.

"I wasn't going to take any," I say.

"Everyone steals them. We have to refill the jar every other day. Please take your hand out of the vase."

"I wasn't," I say, and hold up my empty hand. I stuff my left hand into my jeans and fondle the thirty or so beads I've already deposited there.

"I'm going to count them when you leave." He tries to smile at me, make it a joke, but he doesn't quite pull that off.

"I wasn't – "

"Everyone takes them."

I stick my right hand in my windbreaker and slowly rotate the action figure I've got stowed there; I click its limbs into the shape of a jet.

I write the words SEA OTTER on an index card and stick the card to the glass of the exhibit.

Sanibel Island's Aquarium is empty today. The tourists are gone for the season, and on Tuesday afternoon the island kids are in school. I scrawl the words JELLYFISH and OCTOPUS, and unroll invisible tape from the dispenser. I write the words CONCRETE and COKE MACHINE.

Animals have simple lives. It would be much less complicated to live in a man-made tidal pool behind glass. I'd only have to use one or two index cards in my entire life.

I sit on the ground, next to a wooden bench with a donor's name on a plaque, and I spill a handful of the glass beads on the weathered planks. I spread the baubles out. All of them are clear glass, all have a bubble in the center. I try to arrange them by size, but somebody sits on the bench next to my display. She just plops down, not even looking. I glance up at her; she's about my age, maybe twenty. She's wearing cat eye-glasses and has the kind of black hair that's obvious dyed.

She's kind of pretty. She's got a far away look in her eyes like she just got out of her parents' Winnebago, or like she's on Thorazine. I look at the shapeless but short dress she's wearing. It's gray and black with square patterns of stripes, and I can't decide whether or not it's a hospital gown.

I go back to arranging the beads on the bench but stop again when she reaches down and takes one. She holds the bead in her palm and stares, her eyes flashing back and forth on it, scanning. Then she pops the bead into her mouth. She doesn't say a word, but takes another bead, and another, and swallows them dry.

I stand up and step away from her. I feel the cold metal railing around the Sea Otter exhibit press into my back. She looks at me from the bench and smiles as if nothing strange is going on.

"I've seen you at the Palms," she says. The Palms is the name of the condominium complex where Mom lives. "I'm Annie. I'm in unit 11. By the pool?"

"My name is John," I tell her. "I'm staying in unit 23 with my Mom. I got discharged from the Navy because I'm crazy."

Annie swallows another bead and I wonder if I should offer her the transformer to go with it.

"I've seen you at the Palms," she says.

Mom doesn't like it.

I'm smoking in the condominium unit and watching the evening news. I breathe out puffs, watch the smoke stream away, up to the vent in the ceiling, while, on television, a smart bomb is filming its target as it comes down. The Gulf War as *Candid Camera*.

"They've lit the oil fields on fire," I say.

Mom is in the kitchen, by the dishwasher, and doesn't hear.

"They've set the fields on fire."

My mother, her arm wrapped in bandages, not because of she's suffered any injury but because of the nerve damage, because of the phantom pain in her arms and legs that comes from years of unbalanced insulin levels, my sickly mother in her blue terry cloth robe and bandages, storms into the living room and stubs out my Marlboro. "You may not smoke in the house. I understand that you're mentally unwell, but there are limits."

"This isn't a house," I say.

"In the condo. No smoking."

"They set the oil fields on fire," I tell her.

"I'm glad you're not over there," she says and then takes my sea shell ashtray to the kitchen. "I'm glad you're safe."

I joined the Navy for the discipline. I needed somebody telling me when to get up, when to sit down, when to eat, when to move and when to remain absolutely still.

DISCIPLINE. I write the word on an index card but I don't know where to tape it down.

Iraq invaded Kuwait during basic training. Back in August I heard about Saddam Hussein for the first time. I heard that we'd probably be going to war.

It was a surprise, but I didn't really feel anything about that prospect one way or another. I didn't care about going to war or not going to war, about killing or not killing, living or dying.

My problem was unstructured time. I couldn't handle unstructured time. The navy solved that one for me.

"I can't take making my own decisions and my own way and all of that," I told Dad.

"You were accepted into every college you applied to."

"Yeah, but that's not for me. I'll just end up wandering into traffic."

Dad understood. We had a lot in common. He told me that if it hadn't been for Mom and me, if he hadn't had to find a job and pay a mortgage, he'd probably have been an addict. He would have killed himself with drugs years earlier. "Pressure is what made me recover. Responsibility," Dad said. "Some people need to get trapped by life, otherwise they don't stick with it."

I write the word LIFE on an index card. I write the word FATHER. But I don't know where to put these cards either.

And I'm out of tape.

Annie, the girl I met at the aquarium, told me she was a mermaid. Predictably enough we ended up having sex on the beach. I got sand in my hair and in my mouth, and the water was cold. I swallowed salt water while I shivered and pressed against her, a stranger. Her tongue and mouth, and salt and sand. With my hand between her thighs the world stopped making sense; I couldn't keep track of who was who and what was what.

Then it was over and I watched her eat a beer bottle – a Budweiser bottle, label and all. She broke it into pieces and swallowed them down. She told me that she was a mermaid, a Siren, and that she could taste people's souls when she ate their garbage. "That's where you keep it, your soul. You keep it in your stuff – mostly in the stuff you throw away," Annie said. She folded up the words KING OF BEERS and chewed them up.

Annie is older than I am, and she's done more. At twenty-two she's been a waitress, a student, a drop out, a tour guide. She's lived all over the country. She grew up in Connecticut, moved to Florida to go to college, and when she dropped out she sort of drifted into life on the beach. An aimless life, taking up odd jobs, odd friends, odd ideas.

She lives two buildings over from my mother's condo, in a unit that looks like all the others. Yellow walls, picture postcards behind glass and framed, clean linen and blue tiles in the kitchen. She even has cable television, but she doesn't have any money. I bring her TV dinners and ice cream, cartons of milk and breakfast cereal.

I don't know whose condo it is, or how long she'll stay.

"Your father was a doctor?" she asks.

"An anesthesiologist."

"How did he do it?"

"He overdosed. Put himself to sleep."

We've made dinner. I contribute frozen fish sticks and she serves up ten rusted pennies. We wash back the meal with tap water drunk from disposable plastic cups and watch golf on television. I try a penny, fascinated with her trick, but it tastes awful and I spit it out.

"Medical school fucked Dad up," I say.

The Denver University Hospital kept cadavers in the basement. About thirty bodies were stored in a shallow concrete pool filled with formaldehyde. The bodies were neatly placed in rows, fitted together by size, and stored for dissection.

"Dad's class was taken down in groups of four. Each dissection team was sent down to pick out the body they'd work on. The instructor liked to let his students pick," I tell her as the middle-aged guy on the screen taps his orange golf ball into the hole. "Dad told me that the pool terrified him. He was sure he was going to fall in. He wanted to jump in. His life felt cheap. Those dead people stored like canned vegetables, like overripe tomatoes. Life lost its glamour. He was just another body waiting for eventual dissection."

Annie puts her arms around my waist, snuggles against me on the couch. She lies down, using my right leg as a pillow, her cheek against my thigh. I like her like that. I feel quiet and domestic even as I watch her eat another penny.

"Mermaids don't have to breathe," Annie tells me. "We're like the bodies in the pool."

I never had any trouble following orders. Getting up early and running and jumping, the pull-ups and sit-ups and marching, it was fine. I wasn't the fastest runner, but I wasn't the slowest, and the morning air, the slow burn, the way I could really feel it when I breathed, was good.

Rifles were to be cleaned and reassembled and fired. Bayonets belonged in the belly of the training dummies. When I put the rifle butt to my shoulder and held the gun

steady I just had to really look and empty my mind and I'd hit the target.

Better still were the swim tests. All I had to do was stroke and kick, jump or dive, or just tread water. If there hadn't been any classrooms, if there hadn't been any discussion or questions, no chalkboard, no ideas, no study guides, I'd have skated through basic.

The United States Navy has some core values. It was important to know, but hard for me to understand. For the first time in my life I felt really connected to my body, flexing and flexible. But, when I'd sat down at a wooden desk and the commanding officer started in about how the Navy has met all its challenges, and how "America's Naval service began during the American Revolution, when on October 13, 1775, the Continental Congress created the Continental Navy," I hit a wall. I listened to the CO but I couldn't connect his words to the room I was in, to the way my legs felt, to the way my back bent. Total disconnect.

"Certain bedrock principles or core values," the CO said, but there was a spider walking along the concrete floor. There was a spider right beside the CO, crawling up the blackboard. A big fat spider. And the CO went on about honor and faith and allegiance. The CO said "courage" and "commitment" and "respect" and "spirit" and "dignity" and "moral strength" and "decency" and all the while the spider climbed the wall. A bug was crawling up the wall, and my legs were tired, and I could feel my heart beating, I could hear my breath, and none of it made sense.

I raised my hand, and that was the beginning of the end of my time in the Navy.

"Do you ever have to shit?" I asked.

"What's that, Recruit?"

"Now that you know the code of honor, do you still have to shit or piss? If I pledged my allegiance would I still want to fuck?"

"Get out of my class, Recruit – "

"Sir, there's a big black bug crawling on the wall. Right behind you. How does that fit in with code? It's a fucking bug, sir."

The CO walked to my desk and started barking at me. "You will find the exit, Recruit, in the back of the classroom, and you – "

"Are you going to kill it? How can we create a code and follow it for centuries when we can't even keep insects out of the classroom?"

My CO gave me a slap. It was so hard that it knocked me out of my chair and I stopped talking, stopped asking, for a moment. Then I started up again.

And I kept talking, asking, until I ended up in the infirmary. I listened to my own words, to the nurses and doctors, and everything seemed to come apart. The words that we spoke and the world I lived in separated.

I babbled on about it, just sort of listening to the sounds and admiring the concepts in themselves, and they injected me with serum, and after a while I slowed down. I discovered that when I talked less, when I only spoke when spoken to, they treated me better.

They'd let me out of bed. After a few days they let me walk the halls of the hospital on my own.

I found the index cards on my way back home, after my discharge. I was at the airport, and between flights I wandered in and out of newsstands, restaurants, gift shops. I found the index cards next to a wind up airplane with a propeller that could spin. I bought them straight off, not quite sure why, but when I arrived in Florida, when I found a Sharpie and some tape in mother's desk drawer, I figured it out.

Washing my hands didn't help, and neither did turning doorknobs exactly three times, but the index cards worked. I could reconnect words to the world one at a time.

I'm drinking tomato juice and vodka under a cloth umbrella by the pool. My sister Shelly arrived yesterday; she drove her Mercedes Benz station wagon down from Kentucky because she wanted to help. Now she's sitting at the end of my recliner and squeezing my foot, making human contact. What self-help tape has she been listening to this week? What seminar does she have in mind for me?

"Don't get me wrong," Shelly says, "this war is terrible, and I'm glad you got out of it."

"My juice is bland." I shake my plastic Dixie cup at her.

"What are you going to do now? Get a job?"

There is a ceramic container filled with NutraSweet on the table to my left. I take one of the blue packets, flip it back and forth, and then tear it open and pour it on my ice.

"Have you thought about college?" she asks.

Shelly's six years older than I am. She's married and employed. She works for the Phone Company and her husband, Ted, works for the IRS. They're a conspiracy, both of them.

"No, not college."

"There are treatments. If you're out of control you could go somewhere for help. The family could afford that."

I pat my sister's hand, and then empty the ceramic container. I dump the blue packets onto the table and then tap the dish against the metal frame of the table. I break the ceramic into pieces, scoop up the shards, and drop them in my plastic cup. I take a gulp of the melted ice, and taste NutraSweet and blood.

"What are you doing?" Shelly screams.

"I'm okay," I try to tell her, but nothing will come out. And then I'm rolling on the concrete, my hand at my throat. I'm writhing and kicking over deck chairs and the blood is spilling out of my mouth, down my throat.

I wonder if I can still breathe.

There are stitches and a tube in my throat. I'm propped up on an electric bed, and the television is on. Shelly and Mom are watching CNN and I don't have enough energy to change the channel.

"We have Bernard Shaw in Iraq, reporting from Al-Amiriya, where Iraqi forces suffered major casualties today. Bernard?" the anchor says.

I reach for the remote – it's magnetically attached to my bed frame – but I can't reach far enough.

"You awake?" my sister asks.

I nod, and mime writing, using my hand as an index card. I want to figure out what's happening, find the right word.

Mom seems to understand. She rummages around in her purse for a pen, but then stops and just sits there watching the TV with her mouth open and her hand in her purse.

I'm stuck in the bed, unable to reason. I signal for a pen again, and Mom hands over her fountain pen and her checkbook. I shake my head. I wanted a Sharpie.

"You lost a lot of blood," Mom says.

"You should be dead right now," Shelly says.

The man on the TV set is talking: "The state of people generally is one of pure shock. They're walking around like zombies, Peter."

"Did you want to die? What did you think you were doing?" Shelly asks.

I write on Mom's six hundredth check, fill out the line for a dollar amount with a message instead: *It was supposed to be a trick*.

"Some trick," Shelly says.

It was supposed to be like pulling a tablecloth off a table and leaving the dishes behind, in place, I write on the back of the check.

"But it didn't work, did it?" Mom asks. "Instead you nearly broke everything." And she takes her checkbook away.

The bottles of Prozac, Clozaril, and Depixol look good in the morning sunlight. It's interesting to look at them, set on my bedside table with their sticker labels and childproof lids. I write the word CURE on an index card and tape it across all three of them, but then decide I don't like it. The card reflects too much sunlight and obscures my view of the brown plastic. I take the card down and crunch it into a ball.

Using my thumb I pry the lids off the bottles and dry swallow the pills. I put on Bermuda shorts, comb my hair, apply sun-screen and deodorant, and head for the beach.

Everything seems very clear and brightly lit.

Annie takes my hand and leads me through the crowd of tanning tourists – supine teenagers and egg shaped parents, all greased up and baking in the sand. She picks up a piece of litter, a Pepsi-Cola paper cup, and walks towards the water. Letting her guide me, watching her eat the Pepsi logo, I'm not impressed. Her mermaid fantasy fits in too neatly. It's just another part of this mad system. A system that gets people to travel thousands of miles so they can expose their bodies to a light that's growing steadily brighter, steadily hotter.

Annie is eating the Pepsi cup, ripping the waxed paper along the seam and biting down. I try to get enough sound from my sore throat to object.

"How long can you stay in that condo?" I ask her. "What are you going to do after that?"

She doesn't answer, but walks me to the water's edge. The tide slides up onto our feet, and she finishes her Pepsi cup. She steps out of her modest black and white one-piece swimming suit. How can she be so pale, her legs and ass both the same shiny white? And she's so thin, her ribcage pressing against her skin. She adjusts her cat-eyed glasses and scratches at her pubic hair, while I just marvel.

"Do you need any money?" I ask her. "I could probably get you some money."

"Let's go in," she says. "I'll show you."

"Show me what?" I ask.

A few yards away one of the housewives looks up from paperback distraction, and spots us. The housewife puts her hand up to block the sun from her eyes and, seeing Annie, starts to reach out for her husband but doesn't. She doesn't want him to look after all.

"We've got to go," Annie says.

"I'm not so sure."

"Come on." Annie reaches out for me, water dripping off her arm. She's up to her waist in the ocean. She's up to her chest.

"I don't think so," I tell her.

"Come with me," she says. The ocean is up to her neck, and then she's under. Her arm stays outstretched, her hand grasping for me, for a few more seconds, and then she's gone. I wait for her to come back up, scan the horizon to see if I can find her somewhere, but the sun is too bright.

After a few minutes I decide that she's not coming back, that she's gone for the day.

I pick up her swimsuit and carry it back to the condominium complex. I hang it over a deckchair to dry, and then run my hand across the fabric and remember that the suit never got wet.

The sun is bright, the swimming pool is glittering and sparkling, and everything seems very clear and positive and light. I sit on the concrete and dangle my feet in the water. I watch the palm trees and long grass, feel the sweat run down my back, and feel glad that I remembered to put on sunscreen. Feel glad that I feel glad.

I swing my legs back and forth in the pool, totally content. Back and forth.

After awhile I feel a knot of hunger in my stomach. I look down and see my feet are wrinkled up. I look up again and my eyes are sore.

I stand up from the pool, check my

underarms for stink, and head back to my room.

It's time for my afternoon dose.

Prozac. I'm just guessing but I think it's what is making me feel so good.

The other two drugs, Clozaril and Depixol, these are the anti-psychotics responsible for my lack of interest in index cards and labels. The anti-psychotics are why everything seems so calm and clear.

It's seven o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday, March 6, 1991, and I'm calm and focused. I'm dressed in Bermuda short bathing trunks and an OP sweatshirt. I'm wearing thongs, eating Wheaties, and watching CNN. On the screen there are burned out cars, jeeps, tanks, and buses.

"There are also indications that some of those bombed during the withdrawal were Palestinians and Iraqi civilians. Families trying to flee the destruction," the reporter says.

"We'll be right back." The anchor is unfazed, a sociopath. Neither he nor I have any kind of response. He adjusts his tie and some paper on his desk while the camera pulls back. A bowl of Wheaties fills the screen.

I eat my Wheaties.

Watching CNN I feel just fine. Now there is a commercial for an amusement park on the screen, a water slide, and it's very clear to me that the world is destroying itself.

But napalm, cluster bombs, uranium tipped shells, these are all just fine. I understand, and I'm not upset, and I'm not hallucinating.

I can't hallucinate anymore. I can't get upset.

The prescription bottles are next to my juice glass; I'm drinking a small glass of freshly squeezed orange juice this morning. It's very sweet stuff, and I only drink a little bit, just enough to swallow the pills. One, two, three.

I switch to NBC, to the Today Show with Jane Pauley. She's listening to an expert: "On many occasions Iraqi soldiers tried to surrender to American forces."

"Thank you, Doctor Parenti," Jane Pauley says.

My cereal bowl is empty, and I've finished my juice. I clear my dishes, put them in the dishwasher, and then sit down at the coffee table. My sister has left out a variety of college brochures and looking them over I decide to get to work on them, to get back on track.

Some of the institutions are far away, like Evergreen College in Washington State, and some are very near, like Eckerd College, but all of them are presented well. On the glossy eight by ten pages they are perfectly acceptable, it looks like any of them would suit my needs. Picture perfect colleges with palm trees or pine trees or ivy along the facades. All have a variety of prestigious faculty members and dozens of interesting departments.

I fill out the forms in the back, the application forms. I fill out all six applications and then try to think up my answer to the essay question. I wonder if my SAT and ACT scores are still available by mail.

I feel clear and calm and good. And while the war rages on, as the world cycles through its ending, I start my essay for Eckerd College. *I do not want to go to Eckerd College. I do not want anything. I've gotten beyond all of that*, I write.

Annie's still awake, or maybe awake already, when I knock on the door to her unit. She flings the door open wide, knocking into me and pushing me off the welcome mat. She's in her swimming suit and has a seagull feather scotch taped to her forehead. It's a tiny feather, mostly just a bit of white fuzz.

"I'm going to college, applying for college. I don't feel anything. I wanted to say goodbye."

I write the word on an index card and hand it over to her. She takes the card and sticks it into her mouth.

"Tell me why you were kicked out of the Navy," Annie says.

So I tell her. About the Navy's Code and the index cards. I tell her that Sharpies make nice fat lines, and that it's easy to read words that are written in fat lines with dark ink, easy to understand. "I start to feel disconnected but writing stuff down, labeling stuff, that helps."

"Want to know how I became a mermaid?" she asks. "Do you want to know why I don't have to breathe?"

Annie used to do LSD. She used to do LSD and crystal meth and cocaine and heroin and maybe even airplane glue. She was a party girl, a real good time, and she would go to her dealer's place and stay up for days listening to the stereo and snorting coke or meth, or putting tiny squares of paper on her tongue.

"I ate a dollar bill," Annie says. "I was hungry. I hadn't slept in two days and I was hungry too and because I was too tired to go to the 7-11, too tired to move from the shag carpet, I decided to eliminate the middle man."

She crawled across the carpet, found somebody's purse, rummaged through it, and ate the money inside.

"Money buys food. Money is food," she says.

"But, what happened? How did eating a dollar bill do anything?" I ask.

Annie closes the door to her unit, and steps into the night air. "You've got to get in the water," she says. She's humming tunelessly under her breath and walking gingerly along the boardwalk in her bare feet, pulling me along behind her, she's got me by my waistband.

"I wanted to say goodbye."

Annie tells me that I always get everything backwards. She laughs at me, imitates the way I talk with my damaged throat. I write the word OCEAN on an index card, but Annie grabs it from me. She grabs my index cards, tosses them into the water, and then drags me in after them.

The water is cold, but I go along with her.

Annie takes off her swimming suit when we're far enough out that I can't find the ocean floor. She flings her black one-piece over her head, whipping out a light spray as she spins the suit, and then watches with blank eyes as her suit falls and sinks away. She swims over to me, puts her hands on my back and then slides her hands down and pulls off my trunks. She flings my bathing suit by its inner lining.

Annie dives and finds me underwater. I feel her under me, grasping blindly, cupping my knee. I'm treading water, trying not to kick her, and she pulls me down, pulls me under. Beneath the waves, Annie's arms wrapped around my middle, hands locked together tight, I sink fast. We touch bottom in seconds – fast enough that I worry about the bends.

She's got me in a hold I can't break, and she's much stronger than I'd have expected. With my arms bent behind my back, staring into the dark, I start to jerk and struggle. I don't really want to struggle. It isn't voluntary. I've run out of air, and can't stop myself. I jerk back and forth, try to get my arms free, kick my legs, but I'm stuck.

I lose control, trembling and jerking and anything to get free. I let out a scream and seawater fills my throat. I scream, but, despite everything, I'm all right.

Annie strokes my hair as I sit down on the sea floor. I'm breathing salt water. I can feel the fluid in my lungs, but it doesn't hurt. I don't need anything. I'm fine.

I'm breathing underwater.

Annie kisses me, wraps her legs around my waist, and I reach out and touch her face. She's still got a feather there, on her forehead. The scotch tape hasn't given way.

Now that I can breathe underwater I can also eat trash. I'm not as good at it as Annie, broken glass and metal pull tops are still indigestible, hard to swallow, but I can eat garbage without too much trouble. I've learned how to eat trash and find hidden messages with my tongue. I can find hidden messages in anything.

It started with my breakfast cereal. My Cheerios were talking to me as I crunched them without milk. My teeth chattered, punctuating the cereal's monologue: "Sucked from the earth by a machine. The dirt is dry and pulled and twisted and boxed in. Boxes. Seeds that can't sprout and plants that can't seed. One type of stem and root and leaf and sun for all. All of us the same. All of us speaking with one voice, sucked from the dry earth to be eaten, dry, by one man. The same man in the same room with electricity in a box, eating the dry and desiccated earth. Sucking up dirt from his bowl."

Stirring Cheerios with a stainless steel spoon I'm shaking. The mental effort required to keep breathing in and out is exhausting. Such an optimistic endeavor, sucking air through my nose. I put my head down on a green place mat made of woven cloth, feel the weave leave an impression on my forehead, and hold my breath. I find that holding back, trying to quit, takes more effort than continuing.

I let go, let the habit of living carry me forward. In and out, in and out.

Is this what Annie feels, is this the kind of thing she hears when she eats an aluminum can?

I reach into the kitchen trash and pull out a coffee filter with wet grounds still stuck to the paper. I put the filter in my mouth, bite off a piece, and chew.

"Twisted chemical addiction to plastic love. You will come back. You will continue to continue. Bodies in ditches. Hacked up love. Chemicals that twist and twist. Dark blood welling up in streams of happy, repeating, fractured love. A corpse in your mouth, going down smooth."

I stop eating. It's easier that way. I can't take the manic depression of chewing and swallowing.

My stomach growls with relief and I sit on a cold metal bench at the entrance of the miniature gold course. I watch my sister get her hand stamped for admittance. I hold out my own hand.

"We're up," Shelly says, and gets ready to putt. Mom smiles at her, watches with anticipation. But what's really making Mom feel better is the mail. Mom's glad about the mail. She helped me lick the envelopes earlier that afternoon, and walked with me to the post office.

"We sent out his applications this morning," Mom says. She aligns her orange golf ball on the rubber mat, and then swings her putter too hard and sends the ball flying into a miniature windmill on another hole.

"Mom, he's stopped taking his pills. He needs professional care," Shelly says. "We can't just pretend that everything is okay because he filled out some application forms."

I putt. My green golf ball rolls smoothly down the first lane, right up next to the hole.

"I read his application essay. It was good. I think he'll get in. Don't you think you'll get in?" Mom asks me.

"Yes. Just one more stroke."

"When was the last time you took a bath? When did you last eat? You look terrible," Shelly says.

I drop my club and approach the windmill across from us. Eternity is a circle, watching a windmill spin. I stop it with my hands, and then let go and watch as it starts around again.

"Fore!" Mom shouts. She hits her ball and I see a flash of orange and feel a knob of pain on my shin. The ball bounces off my leg and back into our lane. "His throat hurts is all. That's why he's not eating much. But we sent out the applications today and he wants to go to college. You want to go to college, don't you?"

I start to answer, but the words aren't there for me, the world and the words don't connect. I'm too hungry to talk, too empty. I pick up my golf ball and put it in my mouth, feel the dimpled surface with my tongue, and then spit it out into the hole.

"Children with slanted eyes choke on rubber bands in the happiness factory," I tell Mom.

"What's that?" Mom asks. She stops lining up her shot and turns to look at me.

I say it again. Then I put the handle of my club in my mouth and find something more.

"For our amusement," I tell them both.

My sister puts her hand on mom's shoulder, hugs her as Mom starts in with her tears. I watch them pat and comfort each other as I line up for the next hole.

My bedsheets are terrifying me. I pull the corner of fabric out of my mouth and just lie still in the darkness, unable to move. Petrified by visions of mutilated bodies, people destroyed by weaving machines.

"I'm against the war," Shelly says. "It's not like you're the only one who feels anything."

We're watching CNN and she's looking at the rough draft of my application essay, at my handwriting.

"Just because you're against the world – the war – that doesn't mean you can stop. That doesn't make it noble when you don't eat. It's selfish. Think about Mom."

I change channels and take the essay from her when she gets up from the couch. Shelly leans over, hands me the pages, and stares into my face.

"You won't even look at me," she says.

"Could you fetch my index cards?" I ask, but she doesn't answer. She straightens up and leaves me alone on the couch.

"I'm going to the Beach," she says.

I prod at the bowl of Grape Nuts cereal she brought me, the mass of soggy grain, and then push the bowl aside and look at the screen.

The dead person on television, a cartoon ghost with bulging eyes and veins, has a spray bottle that turns people inside out. Everything on the show is turned into its opposite.

Reading my application essay I'm not sure what to do with it. It's obviously a call for help this thing that I first wrote in long hand and then neatly typed into my mother's PC – it's deranged in its sincerity.

This is my response to the war, to the world, to my failure. This is my attempt to articulate a future, to connect words to the world. I tear it into strips and put them into my mouth while, on the television, a cartoon girl robs a bank while the dead man watches in horror. He doses her with his spray bottle, but she stays crooked. Changed once by the stuff she won't change back. The ghost runs in circles, waving his hands, while the cartoon girl looks at her fingernails.

My essay tastes like chalk, like Indian ink and chalk and pencil shavings. I chew and the taste changes, now it's beer and photocopy ink. Whiteout and whisky.

On television the cartoon ghost falls onto his back and then floats and grows wings. He sprays himself with the magic potion and turns into a devil.

I taste college. It tastes like pretzels and bathroom cleanser. Awful. I put my fingers to my nose, clamp it shut. I take a deep breath through my mouth and then hold it in. My cheeks puff out and face grows hot, but I don't exhale. I don't want to taste anything more. I watch television and wait to black out, but instead of fainting I just relax and open my mouth.

"Beetlejuice, how are you going to fix it now?" a cartoon girl asks.

I open my mouth but I don't exhale. I've eaten my future and now I don't have to breathe.

Annie and I are getting some sun, slathered in tanning lotion. My legs have a thin layer of sand stuck to them, and the towel I'm sitting on is half buried in the beach, but I've chewed my index cards up into pasty wads.

SAND CASTLE. It tastes like plastic heated by the sun, a toy shovel that's gone soft.

Annie is wearing a sports bra and a pair of my boxers instead of a bathing suit. She's covered with feathers and Scotch tape, but the tanning oil is making the tape lose its grip; her Siren identity is coming apart, dripping onto the beach.

"You shouldn't try to understand what you eat," Annie says. "You might hear words, but the important part is how it tastes, what it does in your gut, how it changes you as you digest it, metabolize it."

I write the word METABOLIZE on an index card. It tastes like acid and red meat.

I open the picnic basket we brought with us and take out the *New York Times*. Tearing out images of dead soldiers and the Domestic Stock Index, I hand them to Annie. She blows sand off the newsprint and stuffs the clippings into her mouth. She drags me by my waistband, pulls me to my feet and into the water.

I bob up and down, holding my index cards over my head, and trying to find the ocean floor. I watch Annie take off the boxers and sports bra, watch as she lets her clothes get washed out to sea.

"Mermaids don't have to breathe," Annie reminds me.

"But I'm not a mermaid," I tell her.

Annie asks me to take off my swimming trunks. She tells me to throw my index cards away. I look at her, past her, at the coming wave, and realize that the ocean is going to knock me off my feet anyway. Eventually, I'll be going down. I can't avoid it forever.

"But you don't have to do it alone," Annie says.

As quickly as I can I scribble the word MERMAID on and index card and then stuff the card into my mouth. The water hits me, I'm thrown off my feet, salt and seaweed and force, and I let go of the Sharpie and sink. I try to chew the word MERMAID but a rush of water washes the word away and fills my mouth. I let it push me, let the water pull me off the shoreline and into the open ocean.

And my mouth is full of seawater: "Broke perspective without a center. Spinning without thinking. Ice cold sun. Drowned self. Total submersion. Death."

I sink to the ocean floor, to the bottom, and then reach out, blindly, and grab Annie's hand.

Doug's short-story collection *Last Week's Apocalypse* is due out from Night Shade Books in January 2006, and his fiction has recently appeared in LCRW, *Strange Horizons* and *Whirligig*. Doug has been published once before in TTA, with 'The Subliminal Son' (TTA30).

THE BLACK ANGEL by JOHN CONNOLLY

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 466pp, £14.99

Connolly's fifth book about ex-cop turned private eye Charlie Parker, moves the story along and throws new light on much of what has gone before, finally bringing to the forefront the supernatural elements that have increasingly become part of the general design.

A prostitute called Alice Temple is taken from the streets of New York, an occurrence that's pretty much business as usual for the Big Apple's vulnerable underclass and in the normal course of events her absence would go unnoticed and unmourned, but this girl is related by blood to Parker's friend and ally the contract killer Louis, and he is willing to tear the city apart to find her. The search leads Parker, Louis and boyfriend Angel into a world of art collectors with an unhealthy interest in arcane objects and artisans who fashion their work from human bones. They learn of the legend of the Black Angel, supposedly one of the Fallen, imprisoned in a silver statue by the Abbot of Sedlec monastery in Czechoslovakia and hidden for more than five hundred years. And this in turn brings the trio into conflict with the Believers, a ruthless group of men and women who think they are Fallen Angels wrapped in human bodies. The Believers are assembling the clues that will lead them to the Black Angel, regarded by their leader as a lost brother, and Alice had the bad luck to cross their path. With various wealthy collectors also involved and the Catholic Church taking a hand, the stage is set for the final showdown with the Believers at Sedlec and the revelation of the Black Angel's true nature.

So, the big question first. After *Bad Men* and *Nocturnes* is John Connolly, with this novel, finally out of the closet and revealed as a Horror writer, something a lot of us have suspected all along regardless of the Shamus Award and the Crime genre marketing? My answer would be a qualified yes. The supernatural elements are simply too pervasive to be written off as delusion, despite the author's (force of habit) attempts to hedge his bets and retain some ambiguity about what's going down. All the same, regardless of the fact that much of the book is set in Maine, *The Black Angel* shouldn't be reduced to something as simple as Connolly does Stephen King with a PI. If you need a classification, then thriller with a horror twist, similar though far superior to the kind of thing people like Daniel Easterman produce, is the best way to go.

The next question is whether the supernatural element enhances the story, and on that score I'm not really convinced that it does. Part of the appeal of previous novels like *The White Road* is that they dealt with very real concerns, such as racism and bigotry, which gave the books a moral authority elevating them above mere thrillers. With human wrongdoing displaced by some purer distillation of evil, I can't help feeling that's been weakened, as if by doing so Connolly has given mankind a get out of gaol free card as regards culpability. The change also necessitates a quantum shift in our understanding of Parker himself, details of which I can't reveal without going the route of plot spoiler, except to say that the character moves closer to that of, say, John Constantine, and it's too early to judge whether this is a good thing or not, though those who had difficulty in the past with Parker's occasional psychic flashes may find his new incarnation even harder to swallow.

Okay, enough of the quibbling and attempting to second guess how many angels can dance on the head of John Connolly's mouse. If not quite of a quality with *The White Road*, my personal favourite in the series so far, this latest book is every bit as entertaining as its predecessors, with a complex and compelling story, one that stretches back into the distant past and in the present day takes the form of an intriguing jigsaw puzzle which Parker and his companions must piece together. Plotting has always been one of this writer's great strengths, and here it's seen to full advantage, with a story that in the abstract may seem far fetched, preposterous even, but when given concrete form, fleshed out with a wealth of incidental detail and episodes carefully calculated to bolster the great narrative arc, is never less than riveting and holds the attention completely.

Larger than life villains are another vital ingredient in the mix that makes Connolly's work so appealing – Faulkner, Kittim, The Golem, Mr Pudd - and once again he doesn't disappoint, with a cast of memorable bad guys, from pimp with attitude G-Mack through to 'art' dealer Neddo, Mexican killer Garcia and the beautiful but deadly Hope Zahn. The outstanding character though is the monstrously obese and ruthless Brightwell, a conscienceless killer who takes a personal interest in Parker. Fans of classic crime, alerted by the McGuffin of a statue that is more than it appears to be, will no doubt make the connection with *The Maltese Falcon* and wonder if Brightwell's creation was part inspired by Gutman, but Parker's latest nemesis brings with him a dimension of horror that is all his own and guaranteed to repel the reader even as it delights.

And in Parker himself the bigger drama is given a truly human face, that of a man who must choose between, on the one hand, doing what he thinks is right and helping those who cannot help themselves except for his intervention, and on the other, looking out for the people he loves, as happens here with the alienation of his girl friend's affections and the way in which his actions place the family unit at risk. Parker is the paradigm anti-hero, his moral authority underwritten by the sacrifices he makes and the defining quality of compassion that shines through in his dealings with others, though to the world at large he appears as the eye of the storm, the focus for all the madness and violence that's found in these books. Ultimately he's just an ordinary man tempered in the fires of personal tragedy and who cares just a little too much, and that is what makes us care about him.

And if none of that convinces you to buy *The Black Angel* I should also mention, by way of a clincher, that it contains one of the funniest duck jokes I have ever heard.

POE'S PROGENY edited by GARY FRY

Gray Friar Press pb, 380pp, £13.99 www.fusinghorizons.com/poesprogeny

Editor Gary Fry explains the premise behind this volume in his Introduction, 'I asked contributors to take a classic author or figure or trope from the rich tradition of dark literature, and to use this as the basis of a contemporary tale.' It's an intriguing concept and the end result is certainly rewarding, though I might offer the quibble that some of these 'classic' connections seem a tad tenuous. For instance, while the horrific is a part of their work, dark literature is not the brand name that immediately springs to mind upon hearing such names as Borges, Wells and Woolrich, and elsewhere, though I can appreciate that the distinction between a ghost and a haunted house is valid, some of the tropes listed, as for example 'genre character' and 'the movies', seem to possess a catch-all vagueness, suggesting that for the writers they are simply flags of convenience.

The nature of the project also presents

CASE NOTES BOOK REVIEWS

PETER TENNANT

difficulties for the poor old reviewer, in that maybe he should consider not only the merit of the stories but how they conform to their 'classic' template, and in some other reality where TTA has double the page count and reviews are written by S.T. Joshi that's undoubtedly what happens, but in this one I'm going to follow another classic example, that of Alexander confronted with the Gordian Knot, and pay only cursory attention to the classic angle, or maybe ignore it altogether.

Mike O'Driscoll kicks off with Poe reification 'The Hurting House', whose hero Jim goes to the aid of former best friend Richard, when his wife Madeleine, the woman they both loved, goes missing, but this is the pretext for some finely calibrated character study and psychological observation, as dreams and fantasies, reality and occult texts merge in a shifting narrative where nothing is certain, least of all love. It's a striking opener and sets a high standard for much of what's to come, magnificently fulfilling the volume's ideal by taking and building on Poe, making overt so much of what was only suggested in *Usher*.

'Save the Snutch' sees the perils implicit in *Frankenstein* reaffirmed with the tale of two pranksters who fool a group of eco-protesters and subsequently get the short end of a very nasty stick, a satirical broadside that is atypical of writer Antony Mann's work, a slight but thoroughly enjoyable story. Tim Lebbon tackles Arthur Machen with 'A Ripple in the Veil', whose protagonist is led to an understanding of the magic in nature and the need for man to put his house in order by the death of a bird, an emotive story that stops just short of sentimentality and, for me, comes closer than many to capturing the feel and concerns of its progenitor. Joel Lane's 'A Night on Fire' is a savage and brutal indictment of human cruelty, with shifting perspectives and no hint of any redeeming moral, as revenge escalates into mindless violence in a story that is definitely not for the squeamish.

Greg Beatty's mad science outing, 'Dr Jackman's Lens', is one of the highlights of the book, as a man's visit to the optician results in his learning to see the world in an entirely different manner, becoming part of another species in effect, the story full of confident bombast and cruel invention. Chico Kidd's 'Unfinished Business' is another excursion into the world of her character Captain Da Silva, a man who could easily give Indiana Jones a run for his money, the end product a hugely entertaining confection of werewolves, rat demons and ancient science, rich in atmosphere and with a certain timeless quality that is symptomatic of all the best adventure yarns. 'Once Seen' by Conrad Williams is another chilling evocation of other worldly menace, littered with touches of macabre invention as a crime scene photographer is inexorably drawn into the investigation of a series of gruesome suicides.

'Earth, Water, Oil' by Jon Hartless is one of the weaker stories, told in the form of media reportage and amounting to nothing more than the usual skit on the ecological malpractice of big business and the corruption of politicians. Nicholas Royle's 'Sitting Tenant' is an unusual haunted house story, its revelations having more to do with the psychology of the narrator than the supernatural, satisfyingly different from the norm in its emphasis and with a killer final twist. In 'The Good Unknown' by TTA's resident film guru Stephen Volk, a female star bonds on set with the unknown boy actor who will play her dying son, with events and the emotional ground subtly shifting in a ghost story where the identity and nature of the phantom are left ambiguous to telling effect. Editor Gary Fry's own 'The Strange Case of Jack Myride and Company', is the tale of student Louise Stephenson who is drawn into the world of a computer designer with a radical solution to the problem of job sharing. This is the second longest piece in the volume and something of a qualified success. While meant to echo *Jekyll and Hyde* it invites less flattering comparisons to the Michael Keaton film *Multiplicity* and, for me at least, wasn't totally convincing. Fry's writing is assured though, effortlessly drawing the reader in to the story and making him care about the characters, while the philosophical concerns it enables him to address, having to do with the nature of identity and personality, carry sufficient weight and interest to more than offset whatever artificiality is found in the plot.

Andrew Hook's 'The Pregnant Sky' captures perfectly the feel of Kafka but brings originality to the table as well, with Baxter visiting a city where the people have embraced sterility to atone for some terrible error in their past, investigating the results of such a decision and how it impinges on the real world. Curiously this is the only story that comes with an afterword by the author explaining the connection to its classic inspiration. 'Evidence' by Gene Stewart is one of the low points, the humdrum tale of femme fatale Velma who gets Ed to kill her husband and then double crosses him, a strictly by the numbers rendition that offers absolutely nothing new on this already shop soiled theme. Rhys Hughes, unsurprisingly, takes a shot at following in the footsteps of Borges, but adding his own choreography to the grand design, with 'The Jam of Hypnos' in which a man's dreams of food are given tangible form, the sheer delight of Hughes' invention outweighing his often bizarre and inconsistent plotting.

'Where Angels Come In' is Adam L.G. Nevill's take on M.R. James, as three boys visit a supposedly haunted house that's something of a local legend and, of course, encounter more than they bargained for, a tour de force of creepy invention, macabre events and unsettling imagery. 'The Volkendorf Exhibition' by John L. Probert offers an offbeat look at the art world and its more extreme practices, a vignette with a satisfyingly nasty sting in the tail that more than justifies its status as conte cruel. Richard Gavin's 'The Pale Lover' is another highlight, deftly merging pornography and occultism in the modern day tale of a succubus that's meant to reprise De Maupassant, a story rich in atmosphere and invention, the author's delivery supremely confident and each step on the road to understanding carefully worked out. 'Living Room Zombies' by Kevin L. Donihe is a laugh out loud parody of zombie films, with some delicious dialogue as coke buddies Jim and Randy do a somewhat better job of coping with *The Night of the Living Dead* than the USA's dear old Pres, and, while the story can be treasured for its deadpan humour, there's also a subtle and painfully relevant subtext about our fear of things perceived as different and what that can lead us to.

'Papa Loaty' by Donald R. Burleson is billed as American Gothic and the longest story here, a novella in fact, and wonderfully entertaining, with a deft ear for dialogue and finely tuned sense of place, excellent characterisation and an intriguing story, as handyman Chad

goes to work for the Walker clan, a family with several generations living under the same roof, whose own natural peculiarities have been exacerbated by their nearness to Roswell (think *The Colour Out Of Space*, only without Lovecraft's quintessential misanthropy). Chad's discovery of what's going on, with romantic rivalry as a subplot, is a delight to read from first word to last. And finally we have Ramsey Campbell, who's given the task of embodying the brand name 'modern master', something of which he's eminently capable. Campbell's story, 'Just Behind You', is representative of his work at its best, with a tragic incident from childhood coming back to haunt a teacher, the story rich in sinister atmosphere and with a compelling build up of detail, though as so often with Campbell the story's real thrust can best be gauged from what's going on in the background, as shown here in the inevitably low key, and all the better for it, denouement.

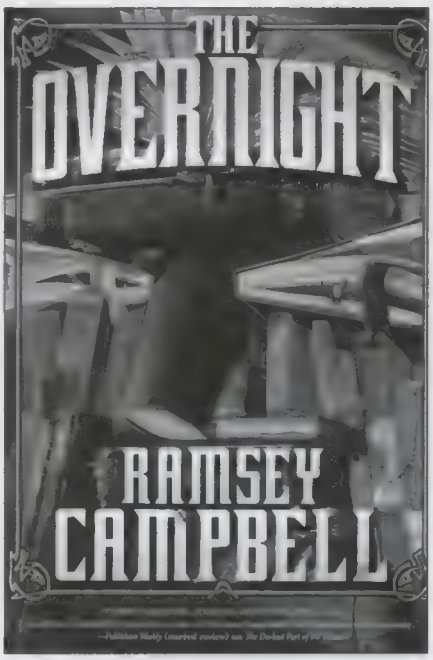
A feisty introduction by Michael Marshall Smith and ten more stories of varying quality by the likes of Mark Morris, Allen Ashley and Simon Clark – my apologies to those writers who didn't get a mention – fill out a substantial volume that all lovers of dark fiction told with skill and vision will want to have on their shelves, and for those who value books not simply as communication media but as objects in their own right, a limited edition hardback version of *Poe's Progeny* is also available.

THE OVERNIGHT by RAMSEY CAMPBELL
Tor hb, 396pp, $24.95 www.tor.com

Fenny Meadows, as the name might suggest and a local historian who wanders in and out of the story cryptically informs anyone who'll listen, is a location with a dubious past, in former times a marsh, the scene of conflict since ancient times and where at least two previous settlements have been lost. In the present day it's a Retail Park, and the action centres on Texts, the UK flagship for an American chain of bookshops. The store is beset by problems, not least of which is the blanket of fog that has descended on Fenny Meadows and appears reluctant to relinquish its grip. With Christmas fast approaching, a dearth of customers and a visit from head office on the cards, American manager Woody decides that desperate measures are called for, and asks his staff to stay overnight and sort out the store's problems, which is when all the chickens come home to roost with a vengeance.

Conceptually, Campbell's latest novel doesn't have much new to offer, is just a return visit to the 'cursed ground' plotline beloved of a whole generation of hack writers and schlock Horror film wannabes. But of course indifferent material can be transformed by the touch of a master, and that is the case here, with Campbell mounting a barrage of effects that bounce off of and reinforce each other, deftly laying the groundwork for the chilling tour de force that is the overnight itself, the attention to detail and careful build-up of atmosphere creating the sense of verisimilitude that distinguishes the very best fiction of this type. Inexplicable accidents, incidents of vandalism, unruly behaviour by the customers, malfunctioning machinery etc, are calling cards by which the numinous announces its presence and demonstrates that its intentions are far from benevolent, and as the overnight progresses ever more outré events occur, exacerbating the strained atmosphere between the employees, until all that remains is to see who will make it to morning. The way in which reality unravels, the carefully placed clues and pivotal events, such as the two fat men who are always sitting in the store, the employee's loss of literacy, the changing videos, the constant fog, the failing lift, the mud patterns and stains on the carpet etc, all contribute to a mounting sense of unease, a certainty that something has gone very wrong with the fabric of this world.

The other central plank of the novel is characterisation, with Campbell utilising a dramatis personae of some fourteen different people, each of whom gets a turn in the driving seat, so that events are filtered through a whole gamut of individual perspectives, with the reader the only one to witness the terrifying gestalt that emerges. To juggle so many characters is an ambitious undertaking, but Campbell never looks like dropping the ball, with each person deftly drawn, given a distinctive voice and traits that make them memorable to the reader, the character blur that might occur with a lesser writer not at all evident here. And having made these people real to us, Campbell then uses them to rack up the tension even higher as they interact with each other, the thing that infests Texts feeding off of the friction between various members of staff, as petty differences are exacerbated by the unnatural conditions and erupt into open conflict, as lone gay Jake plays on the fears of manager wannabe the uptight Greg, and Jill's resentment of Connie, who is seeing her estranged husband, bubbles over into outright hostility, to give just



two examples out of many. Overseeing it all is one of Campbell's most memorable creations, the indefatigable Woody, the very personification of American business philosophy, with his happy clappy managerial style disintegrating as the night goes on, until he is just a gross caricature of some sitcom managerial type, sitting in his office with a permanent grin on his face and bawling orders to all and sundry over the intercom. And there's the suggestion that this madness is Woody's last line of defence against something even more terrible.

The Overnight is a slow but assured novel, one that builds carefully to deliver the maximum of drama, as human shortcomings place its characters at the mercy of an entity that feeds on our negative emotions. It may not be Campbell at his very best, but it's still far better than most of his contemporaries.

DEATH OF AN ORDINARY MAN by GLEN DUNCAN
Scribner pb, 304pp, £6.99 www.simonsays.co.uk

The man in question is Nathan Clark and the premise behind this story is both simple and devastatingly effective. Nathan finds himself attending his own funeral, with no idea of how he died. There are other gaps in his memory; he knows that his youngest daughter Lois is also dead, but has no memory of how her death occurred. People cannot see him, but Nathan can interact with them when close, picking up stray thoughts and reliving the incidents in his life that are closest to the surface of their minds, these in turn sparking other memories. And so he follows the family back to the house for the wake, gaining precious insights into the lives of the people he loved, slowly piecing together the story of his last few hours on earth and the events that preceded them.

At the heart of the story is Nathan's understanding of his nearest and dearest, the discoveries he makes about who essentially these people are and how he helped to shape them, both good and bad. Wife Cheryl is the strong one, once a wannabe novelist, her great moment of triumph marred by personal tragedy, and now a ruthless businesswoman, determined to survive whatever life flings at her; Nathan always feared that she would leave him, and now he comes to see the truth of the matter, that although she had an affair with his best friend Adrian it was never anything more than sex. Daughter Gina has inherited her mother's strength of character, using the funeral as a pretext to lose her virginity to her boyfriend and planning out her future with an air of practicality that is only displacement activity for grief, while son Luke is a bundle of neuroses, prone to kleptomania and fearful of other vices, haunted by the idea that his parents always preferred their daughters, a charge that Nathan grudgingly concedes holds an element of truth, accepting his own share of blame for what the boy has become, yet also coming to the recognition that both children have the necessary emotional equipment to go on and make something of their lives, for which he can happily take some of the credit. Nathan's father Frank, now old and filled with self pity, worries that Cheryl won't support him now her husband is dead. And lurking at back of it all, Banquo at the feast, is the terrible spectre of Lois, whose tragic fate was to haunt Nathan and cause his life to completely unravel.

This is a horror story in the ultimate and most profound sense of that word. It is a story about the things grief can do, about how it can tear a life and a family apart, about a father whose sense of his own identity, those things which define who he is, is completely undermined when he finds himself incapable of protecting those he loves, and even though we may realise where the book is going long before the end the shocks when they come are no less terrible to endure. Duncan is superb at finding just the right phrase to describe a feeling or a memory, to make an event live in the mind of the reader and illuminate it in some new and startling way. His characterisation is masterful throughout, giving us people who are multi- faceted and layered in ways that make the creations of so many of his contemporaries seem like cardboard cut outs. They interact realistically, showing us episodes fraught with emotion and peril, such as the pivotal scene where Nathan takes one of his dead daughter's schoolmates to the house where the family used to live, his strange behaviour giving rise to a moment that is exquisitely balanced on a knife edge and with the sense that events could so easily twist either way, engendering feelings of pity and fear in both girl and reader. And yet for all the tragedy this is not, ultimately, a tragic book, as both Nathan and the Clark family realise it is time to make their peace with the past and move on, to accept what they cannot change, with the white light of redemption beckoning for both as the last pages are read.

Death of an Ordinary Man is a book that will haunt me, one that I want to read again along with everything else that Glen Duncan has ever written, and I strongly urge everyone else to go do the same.

H.P. LOVECRAFT: AGAINST THE WORLD, AGAINST LIFE by MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ
Believer Books pb, 150pp, $18 www.believermag.com

Houellebecq comes to praise Lovecraft, not bury him

Originally published in 1991, this new translation by Dorna Khazeni of distinguished French novelist Houellebecq's appreciation of Lovecraft comes with an introduction by Stephen King and reprints two of HPL's most celebrated stories, *The Whisperer in the Dark* and *The Call of Cthulhu*, part of what Houellebecq refers to as the 'great texts'.

Houellebecq's work often reads more like the outpourings of a fan boy than the serious critical musings one might have expected given his status in the world of letters, but this very accessibility is a part of its appeal for the layman and the points he makes, however enthusiastically, have validity. He is excellent at identifying what makes the work of Lovecraft so memorable, the uniqueness of the mythology that writer created, finding few others of comparable stature, and the underlying nullity that gave his work a philosophical and metaphysical force missing from much of the rest of weird fiction.

Houellebecq also addresses the flaws that others have found in the great body of Lovecraft's fiction. He finds in favour of the adjective laden prose, often bordering on the purple, that has given many pause for thought, arguing that Lovecraft's literary style was ideally suited for the 'in your face' fiction the author was creating. In one telling section he compares the Lovecraft model, with its terrors laid out in the starkest terms from the very start, to the more fashionable genre template, where the horror is revealed only after a slow build-up. Another sticking point for many readers, the racism found in Lovecraft's stories, is also addressed. The author does not condone such attitudes, but he does attempt to provide a context by describing Lovecraft's haughty WASP background with its, for the time, natural assumption of superiority and how such ideas ran aground on HPL's experiences in New York, where he found himself unsuited for even the lowliest job in the face of immigrant competition, an event which soured Lovecraft forever and added a note of bitterness to his attitude.

The book is, as I've already remarked, a somewhat lightweight production: Houellebecq comes to praise Lovecraft, not bury him, and those expecting in-depth analysis and reduction along lines of literary theory will be disappointed. For the rest of us, those considering whether to reacquaint themselves with Lovecraft's work or simply wanting to gain some deeper understanding of the importance of his oeuvre, it is an eminently suitable volume, at all times engaging and filled with intriguing titbits of information, providing us with an astute and interesting evaluation of one of the most influential writers in the genre.

DESOLATION by TIM LEBBON

Leisure pb, 309pp, $6.99 www.dorchesterpub.com

As a child Cain was raised by his insane father, who subjected him to a regime of constant psychological and physical abuse as a means to unlocking a talent referred to simply as Pure Sight, conceived of as a unique and powerful way of connecting with the world. After his father's death Cain was transferred to a care home of sorts, where he recovered from his ordeal under the supervision of two people referred to simply as the Voice and the Face. Finally, as a young man, he is ready to venture out on his own into the world, and a place is found for him at No. 13 Endless Crescent, a halfway house where Cain will have his own rooms and independence of a kind. But slowly Cain, his sanity always held by a thread, comes to realise that not everything at the house is what it seems, and as he investigates the other people staying there and the fate of the previous occupant of his room, it becomes clear that his mad father's machinations are still reaching out to embrace him.

Lebbon invests considerable time and skill in capturing Cain's fractured mental state, with the hints we receive of all his father subjected him to unsettling in the extreme. The devices he uses to bring this uniquely damaged individual to life - having him refer to people by their distinguishing characteristics (Voice, Face) and compartmentalise a vital part of his own personality by treating it as a separate entity locked away in a trunk – are original and extremely effective, causing the reader to both identify with and also draw slightly away from this disturbed young man, an uneasy dichotomy that's polarised even further by the dilemma that confronts Cain.

The residents of the ironically named HEAVEN – Whistler, whose pipe playing can transfix both man and beast; Magenta, who can take on the appearance of other people; Sister Josephine, the flying nun; George, who can change at will into a murderous beast – are an intriguing dramatis personae, Lebbon taking obvious horror stereotypes, such as the witch and the

Author of The Nature of Balance and Face
TIM LEBBON
DESOLATION
"Lebbon's work is infused with the contemporary realism of Stephen King and the lyricism of Ray Bradbury." — Fangoria

werewolf, but depicting them as seen from an oblique angle, focusing not so much on their powers and the terror they evoke, though those are obviously part of the mix, but more on the essential strangeness of their lives. For Cain these people represent a chance of family, of acceptance for who and what he is, his last and best hope to be normal, but the price demanded may well prove more than he is prepared to pay.

Bottom line with this novel is that it's Marvel's *X-Men* given a horror twist and scrupulous avoidance of the M-word, a superhero team story without any heroes, but filled with all the old and familiar angst, where the battle must be fought not against some external foe but with Cain's own nature, forcing him to choose between embracing his outsider status or find some other way that allows room for his humanity. And at its heart is a rich subtext about dealing with being different and learning to accommodate one's essential nature in a meaningful, non-destructive way. Recommended.

UNDERGROUND by CRAIG SPECTOR

Tor hb, 254pp, $23.95 www.tor.com

Custis Manor in Stillson Beach, VA, is one of the great houses of America's south, its status as a site of special historic interest belying a brutal past in which the wealth and power of the Custis family was based on the slave trade. Back in the early 1980s a group of seven disaffected youths, collectively known as the Underground and among them rebellious younger son Josh Custis, broke into the Manor to hold a party, but fuelled by drugs and inner jealousy the event ended in tragedy, with one member dead and another missing, the rest haunted by visions of all the terrors they have seen.

In the present day and against a background of political unrest, with secret racist Duke Custis set to be elected Governor, the remaining members of the Underground receive a sign that the missing Mia is still alive, trapped in some other dimensional hell which can be accessed through Custis Manor. The group must return to rescue Mia, with the aid of black radicals intent on destroying the Manor, which represents all they loathe. But the danger is greater than anyone suspects; Silas Custis, the founder of the family's fortune, made a deal with a voodoo shaman and his evil lives on in that other dimension, ruling over a slave empire with a ruthless hand, and to set things right his power must be broken and all the enslaved spirits set free. While black militants and Klan wannabes fight to the death, the Underground must face the ultimate evil.

Slavery, racial prejudice and politics lie at the heart of this book, giving it both a moral authority and adding meaning to the text, but at the same time necessitating some cumbersome info-dumps, such as the minor character whose history with the Klan and its affiliates is filled in at three times the page count it takes to actually dispose of him, and other characters as, for instance, the Stillson Beach Police Chief, whose sole purpose seems to be to wander in and out of the text filling in parts of the back story and adding a soupcon of historical perspective. All of this seems rather clumsy and could maybe have been handled better, while on rare (sore thumb) occasions the writing itself verges on parody of the kind of hippie jargon to which the characters would have been prone in their teens.

The books succeeds on so many other levels though, such as in its evocation of the Underground, people who were once rebels but have now lapsed into sedate respectability, forced to once again take up arms and try to rediscover some of the idealism that fired them in youth, and even more so when the back story of the Custis family is filled in, with old monster Silas and his career in evil rendered in terms that almost physically repel, with scenes of amorality and abuse that echo Morrison's *Beloved*. The tension between the various factions also comes over very well, with the constant reminder that the allies of circumstance don't always share the same ultimate ends, and Custis Manor itself is one of the more memorable haunted houses in Horror fiction, a place where the evil of the past permeates the very walls and the air which people breathe. There is

convincing magic as well, the sense that the supernatural side of things has been carefully worked out and with an eye for internal consistency.

All of this is to the good, but it is in the last eighty or so pages, when the shit hits the fan, that this book comes into its own and Spector's careful groundwork pays off, with riveting scenes of combat in this world and the next, a story that grips and excites the reader as the Underground must fight supernatural forces and evil humans both, all the while racing against the clock. It's a showstopper, no doubt about that, with images of violence and supernatural mayhem that will linger in the mind, and the only sour note struck by a final touch of poetic justice that maybe the writer should have resisted.

Craig Spector's novel deals with serious themes in an intelligent and mature manner, but without sacrificing entertainment on the altar of polemic.

BOOK OF VOICES edited by MICHAEL BUTSCHER
Flame Books pb, 202pp, price unknown www.flamebooks.com

As Michael Butscher explains in his Introduction, the African nation of Sierra Leone is only now emerging from a devastating period of civil unrest dating back to the 1990s. At such times funding for literature is not a priority, but all the same freedom of expression is an essential part of any people's identity, a means by which they define themselves and the ideals to which they aspire, hence this anthology, profits from which are to be donated to the Sierra Leone branch of writers' organisation PEN.

Book of Voices casts its net wide, with an international line up of contributors and a diversity of approaches, but perhaps not surprisingly the fourteen stories between its covers are dominated by twin themes of political repression and the need to write, to tell the stories that reveal who we are.

The opening story, Catherynne M. Valente's 'The Psalm of the Second Body', harks back to the very origins of language and literature itself, presenting the reader with a vivid fusion of prose and poetry that throws new light on the ancient story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, one of the seminal fictions of mankind. Gregory Norminton compounds this initial good impression with 'The Soul Surgeons', a piece of cod-Elizabethan prose that reveals the true story behind the death of Kit Marlow, along the way raising vital questions about censorship and the impulse to write, all wrapped up in a character driven tale and totally credible. 'Electric Fence' by Gary Quinn is somewhat less substantial, but deftly written all the same with pitch perfect characterisation, a snapshot of one single moment along the road to tyranny. Marc Paoletti's 'Polenta' is a beautifully realised evocation of the world of Italian immigrants in New York of the 1930s, capturing the plight of a young son charged with looking after his mother, the story effortlessly engaging the emotions through its recognition and celebration of values that are universal. 'Dasi' by Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar is no less moving but in a different way, a harrowing account of the life of a young woman widowed in Brahmin society, someone who to all intents and purposes is defined by her wifely status and becomes a non-person when this is taken from her, the story checking in on her at various ages and showing how she is brutalised by outwardly charitable treatment and the regime of psychological cruelty at back of it.

Neil Grimmett's 'Shining the Light' is set in the Greek islands and has a couple from England visiting to discover a family secret from many years back, a story that holds the attention all the way, with a strong sense of place and deft characterisation, though I did feel it somewhat fizzled out in the final stretch. 'Sally Moore' by Yolande Sorores is a subtle and clever examination of the will to write, with a successful novelist realising how much of her career is owed to what she, at the time, considered unfair treatment from a teacher. 'Home' by Moshe Bennarach is the longest piece in the book and also one of the weakest, a sub-Borges account of the search for a, possibly, mythic text, one of dubious provenance and which appears to be different on every occasion that it is described, and the narrative itself suffers from similar shortcomings, with little in the way of clarity or real direction, informed by a self-referential delight that left this reader unwilling to engage with it in any but the most superficial manner. Andrew Hook's 'Beyond Each Blue Horizon' tells the story of a student coming to realise that the other members of the household in which he lives are disappearing, an oblique and slightly earnest attempt to address problems such as Argentina's Disappeared, but with little new to add. 'The Age of Universal Deceit' by Patrick Neate is another piece in which brittle cleverness has to serve in place of real insight, political satire masquerading as an article on a new movement in the arts. The title 'No Story At All' kind of speaks for itself, and I'm afraid Scott Kelly's portentous short went right over my head.

Having reached a low after a good start, *Book of Voices* now rallies to end with three of the strongest stories in the collection. Jeffrey Ford's deliciously tongue in cheek 'Boatman's Holiday' brings alive the figure of Charon and his quest for relief from the age old task of ferrying the dead, the story filled with invention that simply doesn't let up, an enviable lightness of touch in dealing with serious matters and wry humour. Yema, the heroine of 'On the Road to Godiva' by Brian James, the only writer from Sierra Leone to feature in the collection, is sent off to a private school where it's hoped her rebellious ways will be cured, but takes a wrong turn and ends up at the stronghold of the demons who are tearing her country apart. With its string of macabre events, a magic realist sense of the outré and everyday overlapping, and some genuinely nasty bad things, this could easily pass for a superior horror story, but James gives it a political dimension which, at one and the same time, endows the story with a worth that belies its roots in folklore and sends it spiralling dangerously close to preaching, a condition James just about stops short of. 'The Flame' by Tanith Lee is an inspirational account of the writer in chains and celebration of the indomitable spirit that will not be silenced. It's a fitting note on which to end, bringing us full circle and serving up a timely reminder of what this book is really all about.

THE MASK BEHIND THE FACE by STUART YOUNG

Pendragon Press pb, 74pp, £4.99 www.pendragonpress.co.uk

Stuart Young is a writer whose work has been appearing in the Small Press for a number of years now, and this second print collection, which comes with an Introduction by Mark Samuels, neatly bookends his career, featuring as it does both his very first story and the latest.

The novella from which the book takes its title, tells the story of Craig, husband of Paula and father of Sophie, a devoted family man and devout Christian. Craig suffers from Pick's Disease, an affliction that leaves him prone to Tourette's style outbursts and causes radical changes in his personality; for one thing he suddenly finds that he has talent as an artist, an ability that hadn't been evident before the illness took hold. And for another he's increasingly drawn to question all that he previously took for granted, such as his faith. At the suggestion of an old girlfriend and against the wishes of his wife, Craig undertakes meditation to help him cope and as a result has a vision of God that both undermines accepted theology and places his family in danger.

This is an engaging and well written story, brim full of believable characters, intriguing concepts and a satisfying ambivalence about matters metaphysical. God, depicted here as an idiot creator along the lines of Lovecraft's Azazoth but with elements of Nietzsche in the mix, is most likely a symptom of Craig's derangement, but Young holds out the tantalising possibility that God could also be Craig's counterpart, with mankind playing the role of Pick's Disease in His life. Ultimately it seems that knowledge of final things is relative, with Craig's wife 'gifted' a revelation of the true nature of the universe and twisting it to fit the preconceptions of her faith. 'The Mask Behind the Face' is perhaps a little too vague in its conclusions, with the sense that the story actually goes nowhere and the writer has drawn himself into a corner, but all the same the trip to this point is enjoyable enough, time spent in the company of people who, thanks to Young's skill at rendering the ordinary weft and warp of human relationships in credible terms, we come to care about and with a compelling eschatological backdrop to it all.

The three stories that make up the rest of the collection are less ambitious but perhaps more successful on their own terms. 'The Death of Innocence' is a powerful and effective indictment of violence, dealing with psychological effects rather than the physical, as a man who has been beaten up by a gang is left housebound with fear, and forced to confront unpalatable truths about his own nature. 'Daddy's Little Girl', which previously appeared in *Nasty Piece of Work* and was Young's first published effort, is a story that never comes out and clearly states what is going on and is all the more effective for that, as a young girl looks forward to starring in a film for her daddy and his friends, the horror of this situation made very real by the child's lack of guile and innocent desire to be famous. 'Mr Nice Guy', the other 'new' story and the only piece that didn't work for me, is excellent as the character study of a Goth guy who is looking for love in all the wrong places, but that's grafted onto a bog standard horror plot about the songs he writes causing people to die, lacking both the psychological acuity and more challenging concerns of the other stories here. It's a weak note on which to end but doesn't undermine what's generally a very strong collection from a writer who shows real promise.

DON'T TURN OUT THE LIGHT edited by STEPHEN JONES

PS Publishing hb, 281pp, £25 www.pspublishing.co.uk

This is the third in a series of anthologies, combining both new and reprint material, intended to capture the flavour of Christine Campbell Thomson's *Not at Night* volumes from the 1920/30s.

It contains seventeen stories in total, book ended by two modern classics of the genre, Bradbury's 'Fever Dream' and 'Dance of the Dead' by Richard Matheson. Other reprises include 'Flies by Night' by Lisa Tuttle and Steven Utley, which cleverly puts a feminist twist on transformation, the narrative rich in ambiguity and its plot firmly rooted in the character's psychology. Charles L. Grant's 'Are You Afraid of the Dark?' from 1984 is one of the most effective stories in the collection, with an other worldly baby sitter brought in to teach three recalcitrant children the error of their ways, the tale demonstrating a sure grasp of the world as seen through a child's eyes, rich in menace and with numerous sinister touches of invention that enhance the general sense of something genuinely macabre taking place. A more recent reprint, 'King of Outer Space' by Peter Atkins from 2001, harks back to the pulp horrors of yore with its tale of a woman seeking the truth about her supposedly dead fiancé, a story where the gonzo prose style and fast paced invention enable it to rise above some slightly cheesy plotting. Richard Christian Matheson's 'City of Dreams' explores the obsession with celebrity when a famous person moves in next door to a scriptwriter with an eye out for the possibilities of networking, a spectral strand developing and transforming the story into a beautifully written variation on a familiar theme. Paul McAuley's 'Inheritance', originally published in 1988 and extensively revised for this collection, is a Jamesian ghost story, with a man returning from the colonies in search of his family history and stirring up something more deadly than mere memories, a competently written and entertaining piece, albeit nothing out of the ordinary for this type of thing. Also seeing the light of the day for, at least, the second time is a story from the original Campbell Thomson series, Hugh B. Cave's lively and entertaining tale of witch doctors and bizarre goings on in Darkest Africa, 'The Cult of the White Ape'.

Leading off the material that's original to this collection is 'Expanding Your Capabilities Using Frame/Shift TM Mode' in which author David J. Schow uses technology to realise the wet dream of every sad case who's ever used the VCR's freeze frame button for purposes other than the purely educational, an engaging piece of fiction which walks the walk and talks the talk as its techno-dweeb protagonist collects his just desserts. Nowhere near as engaging is the slightly dreary 'Shirley's Ghost', John Glasby's join the dots tale of a nautical haunting, which neither surprises nor convinces. 'Phoenix Man' by Gary Kilworth presents the case of one Dan Strickman, who finds that burning himself is not a fatal activity but instead leaves him feeling cleansed of all sin and therefore free to go and sin again. As Strickman's addiction runs its course emotions rise to boiling point with his wife and the man who loves her, so that tragedy is inevitable in a compelling story whose over the top premise is never less than credible. 'Shallaballah' by Mark Samuels is one of the weaker stories, an attempt at putting a modern spin on the myth of Mr Punch, grittily written and filled with unsettling imagery of social and moral decay, but a tale that doesn't quite come off, is perhaps ultimately a bit too diffuse and unfocused for its own good.

'The Other Family' by Roberta Lannes is a moody and effective ghost story with a novel twist, hinging as it does on a

family's sense of group identity and showing what may happen when this is undermined. John Burke's 'The Bite of the Tawse' is another highlight, a tale celebrating corporal punishment in Scotland and its legacy, with the matter of fact way in which the protagonist is drawn into the web of bizarreness especially chilling and the sinister undertones, with their hint of vampirism, adding to the overall impression of something very bad being accepted as the norm. Basil Copper's 'Queen Bee' a tale of nature red in tooth and claw, with something outré poured into the mix, offers nothing new, but is well written and has the sense not to outstay its welcome. 'Ding-Dong-Bell' by Jay Russell is a singularly quirky piece and the most overtly horrific story in the collection, serial killer shtick cut with pitch black comedy and commemorating early events in the life of J. Edgar Hoover, showing how childhood happenings can shape the man. The longest story here and one of the subtlest, Terry Lamsley's 'Sickhouse Hospitality' presents the reader with a very unusual hospital and a chain of events made all the more sinister by their ambiguity, dozens of little touches of detail adding up to present a chilling tour de force, a shifting inner city landscape abandoned by certainty and where safety is just another pipedream.

The book comes with an Introduction by editor Jones, a striking full colour cover by Les Edwards and interior artwork by Randy Broecker, making for a very attractive package.

FIRECRACKER by SEAN STEWART
Weidenfeld & Nicolson hb, 227pp, £12.99 www.orionbooks.co.uk

The latest novel from World Fantasy Award winner Sean Stewart, addresses the question of what happens to the kid from *Sixth Sense* when he grows up, and the author's conclusions are far from happy.

William Kennedy, a thirty two year old Texan, has some serious problems, such as the inability to hold down a job, a wife he still loves but who left him for another man whom he despises, a daughter who is starting to develop breasts and show signs of greater maturity than Kennedy himself can manage. To close friends and family he's been known since childhood as 'Dead' Kennedy, his ability to see the dead accepted and largely ignored, rather like bedwetting in fact, something that's not talked about and which he's supposed to have grown out of. Its significance lies not with others but in the effect it has had on his own life, such as all of the above, and small, practical matters, like being unable to drive a car because of the things he sees all the time. Down on his luck Kennedy reluctantly agrees to use his ability for personal gain, helping out a long lost cousin who has a dead girl hanging about in the garage, but too late he realises that not all is as it appears, a discovery which places his own life in jeopardy. Kennedy has to take drastic steps to save himself, but the result is he ends up haunted by his own personal phantom hell-bent on revenge, attacking him through his family, the only people he cares about. Fortunately there are other family ghosts who come to his aid.

While central to the story you could make the case that ghosts are not what this book is all about, are just a little trimming to justify a fantasy categorisation. The centre of the story is Kennedy's attempt to come to terms with his past, to learn to accept that his wife has moved on, to deal with his special ability in a positive way, to reach an understanding with his daughter Megan, to lay to rest the ghosts that haunt him, including that of AJ, the first girl he ever loved and who committed suicide. Stewart is a clever writer, skilfully merging past and present and showing how one informs the other, giving us a vision of the afterlife and the ways of the dead that is both fascinatingly macabre and depressingly mundane. His real gift though is for characterisation, with a larger than life supporting cast to flesh out the story and provide context for what's happening to the book's main protagonist. The worldly wise Megan is a particular treat, a precocious teen but gratifyingly free of the angst and cloying sentimentality that makes you want to throw up on meeting many of her filmic contemporaries. Kennedy and his concerns are given an appealing quality by the wonderful self mocking and wistfully sad tone of voice in which the story is told, so that while recognising him as one of life's losers, and largely owing to the way in which he played the hand life dealt him, nonetheless you can't help feeling for the guy and wanting everything to turn out okay for him, on which score kudos to Stewart for dodging the bullet of a happy ending and giving us something bittersweet instead.

Firecracker is both moving and funny, touching on the profound but with its feet set firmly on the ground, and I enjoyed it very much.

KILLING THE BEASTS by CHRIS SIMMS
Orion hb, 288pp, £12.99 www.orionbooks.co.uk

The Commonwealth Games of 2002 are central to this Manchester based thriller, with events before and after that watershed woven into the plot. A former star of the rugby field, John Spicer is now a police detective. Prior to the Games Spicer was the head of a task force charged with catching a ring of car thieves specialising in high performance motors, and after he is transferred to a murder enquiry, the tentative first step in the hunt for a serial killer who, apparently, strikes at random. Spicer's friend Tom Benwell is making a lot of money off the back of the Games by selling advertising space at choice venues around the city, a demanding job that places him under considerable strain, and when he disappears Spicer is led to the conclusion that not only are his two cases, past and present, linked but Benwell is somehow involved in both.

Where this book scores is in the characterisation, especially that of the

two leads. Benwell is a perfectly realised example of yuppie grace folding under pressure, with his high powered job and trophy wife who lives to shop, the sports car and the two hundred pound a day habit, clinging on to his dream of retiring to run a seaside café in Cornwall as his life crumbles around him. Spicer is in many ways his opposite, happy with his comparatively ordinary girlfriend and challenging, but low paid job, though even he isn't as well adjusted as he could be, with commitment issues in his relationship and a dark streak, the violence that served him so well on the rugby field carrying over into his police career with somewhat less success. Rugby is the pretext for these two men to be friends and as such works tolerably well, providing a cache of shared memories and easy camaraderie. And yet, even here, Simms somewhat fumbles the ball, so the reader is left wondering if Tom and John are meant to be seen as best friends or simply occasional drinking buddies, something that isn't always clear from the way they interact.

Plot on the other hand is where the novel falls down, with a little too much complication for its own good and twists that don't really convince. As an example, the killer's reason for choosing his victims comes over as entirely superficial, pure flim flam and picked on not for any solid grounding in the character of the murderer, but simply because it's something the reader, like the police, will never think of, and, in parenthesis, I have to express some incredulity that all of his victims are female when my own experience is that men are far more prone to the offence that ticks him off. Similarly, the way in which the characters are all connected is stretching credibility and an unnecessary ploy, serving no real purpose except to provide enough red herrings to put Billingsgate out of business. It culminates in an almost Keystone Cops style ending, with Spicer having twigged the connection between the previous victims and realising that everyone in his address book is a potential target, so chasing from one house to another in an attempt to cut the killer off at the pass. The mental illness that besets the killer seems convincingly portrayed, though I'm not in a position to say for sure, but the way in which this illness is expressed doesn't quite click, is just another faux demonstration that care in the community doesn't work.

Simms' prose is easygoing and *Killing the Beasts* is ideal for a long coach journey, the circumstances in which I read the book, but overall I didn't find it sufficiently convincing or compelling.

Charlie Williams' sequel to *Deadfolk* returns us to Mangel, the West Country's answer to the Big Apple. Things are changing in Mangel: the town is seeing an unprecedented wave of adolescent crime, as the young people look to satisfy their craving for euphemistically named 'sweets' brought in from the outside. Royston Blake is still minding door at Hoppers though, so not everything is going to hell in a hand basket. Greengrocer Doug offers our hero a large sum of fags and lager to return his errant daughter Mona to the family fold and beat the crap out of the older man she's dating, which shouldn't pose too much of a problem to a thug of Blake's calibre. Only it turns out the man in question, one Nick Nopoly, is the new owner of Hoppers and so poor old Blake faces a conflict of interest, his dilemma compounded when Nick, who seems kindly disposed towards him, offers promotion to the cherished post of personal minder, a job Royston Blake feels he was born for. Of course Blake manages to screw things up, both for himself and everyone around him, but the fun is in finding out how he does this and how these events fit into the larger scheme of Mangel's nascent drug trade.

Fags and Lager reprises much of its predecessor's strengths, with Royston Blake once again the unreliable narrator to the max, as all the events are filtered through his somewhat jaundiced perceptions, both as to his own intelligence and standing in the community, with so much of the black comedy arising out of the tension between reality and Blake's badly skewed view of things. By and large the supporting cast are simply foils for Blake, even such larger than life characters as the supposedly omniscient Nathan the bartender, their main purpose to move the plot along and provide opportunities for Blake to be an even bigger plonker than on the previous page. Scenes such as that where Blake imagines a conversation with his hero Clint Eastwood are the tip of a substantial comic iceberg.

Williams is very good at plotting, with a story that ties itself in knots only to effortlessly undo them all before the finale, and the past coming back to haunt Blake only, of course, he's too dumb to realise. It's up to the author to provide the real skinny while his narrator remains blissfully oblivious, cleverly shifting our perceptions, with narrative devices that reveal what is really going on, hints about events in the past and sidebar views of the present. One such trick put to effective use is that of prefacing each chapter with newspaper reports that fill in the background and add some verisimilitude to the story.

As characters in fiction they come with their own in-built obsolescence. So far Williams has kept on the right side of the line, but it's legitimate to wonder how much longer he can stay there

And yet, enjoyable as this is, there's no denying that some of the shine has worn off of Williams' creation, the novelty of *Deadfolk* giving way to a sense of carefully orchestrated outrage as the norm. In the previous book Blake was a big man with a little brain, and therefore suitable material for laughter, his pretensions and self-deception all grist for the comedic mill, but now the act is wearing thin and by the end I was wondering how much more I could take. How many more sentences with fuck in just about every other line, how many more Ford Cortina eulogies, how many more episodes that show women are only good for the one thing, and so on. Bottom line is that Blake is a bore, and the thing with all bores is that eventually the tedium of spending time in their company comes to overshadow any amusement their delusions about themselves might engender. As characters in fiction they come with their own in-built obsolescence. So far Williams has kept on the right side of the line, but it's legitimate to wonder how much longer he can stay there.

There's a lot to commend this book, far more than not. The West Country setting is an appealing venue for the crime aficionado. Mangel comes with an atmosphere of its own and an inbred populace who wouldn't look out of place in the pages of Lovecraft. It offers a unique alternative to all those downtown streets in which the bad guys usually ply their trade, and Williams has only scratched the surface of its potential. But while I look forward to seeing what he can come up with next, I do hope it isn't another Royston Blake novel as that particular vehicle for black comedy (a Ford Cortina, no doubt) is now running on close to empty.

THE LIFE TO COME by TIM LEES
Elastic Press pb, 200pp. £5
www.elasticpress.com

Tim Lees is a name that should be familiar to any long standing reader of TTA, and nine of the sixteen stories that form this collection have appeared previously in either TTA itself or sister magazine *Crimewave*, while an eye catching cover from artist Richard Marchand underlines the connection.

Lees is a writer whose influences at times seem a little too close to the surface, but he wears them lightly. Aliens, spacecraft, other dimensions and all the tropes of Science Fiction are a vital ingredient of his craft, but the end product is a kind of superior kitchen sink drama where these things serve as catalysts for a minimalist and emotionally acute form of storytelling in which human beings are always central. His prose is subtle, detailed and rich in observation, with an eye for nuance and shades of feeling. If he has a fault it is that occasionally the stories seem to end long before any resolution is reached, but this shortcoming, if it is that, is a by product of a narrative driven by character rather than plot.

'Home in the Light' is in many ways an atypical Lees story, its central character an alien who echoes Vonnegut's Trafalmadorians in the ability his race have to manipulate time and spend their entire lives in a single, happy moment, but this particular alien has overshot and is stranded on Earth where he struggles to fit in. The story, as witnessed through the eyes of a woman who rejected his advances and now feels responsible for what happens to him, is not so much about what it means to be an alien, an outsider, but how the extraordinary is rendered null through association with the mundane, and with a hint of the redeeming power represented by love. In 'Boomtime', which could easily be the mirror image of this story, Lees presents the opposite scenario, with the aptly named Man from Mars flooding the Earth with cheap consumer goods and humanity reduced to cargo cultists, ignorant of the true cost of this material bounty, the story convincingly told from the viewpoint of an ex-con and alcoholic. At back of both stories is the observation that the miraculous and the ordinary cannot co-exist without irrevocable harm to one or the other.

This theme is reprised in a series of stories that bring to mind the classic novel *Roadside Picnic* by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, in which alien technology abandoned on Earth holds no more significance than the rubbish left behind by a family out on a day trip in the countryside. Title story 'The Life to Come' depicts a world in chaos, where an alien blob appearing in the living room and taking up residence is no more remarkable than the phone ringing, as the unrealised future seeds the past in the hope of ensuring its own reality, while in 'Relics' a young man from the city comes to the islands and scavenges for artefacts from an alien craft that crashed in the sea. In both stories the science fiction elements, engaging as they are, play second fiddle to the human relationships, with John in the former story prompted by force of circumstance to rekindle his relationship with old girlfriend Hannah, while the protagonist of 'Relics' is revealed as essentially shallow and incapable of commitment, to either the search for artefacts or the beautiful Julia, who he loves, and as a result he loses the only things that are worth having. In 'Homeground' the rural enclave of Stickley Grange is changed by the presence of an alien spaceship and the distortion of reality that follows, with the miraculous trivialised and reduced to tourist attraction as the less scrupulous locals attempt to cash in, a marvellous work of fiction that speaks of the serpent to be found in every Eden, because it nests in the human heart.

Another trilogy of linked stories, both thematically and by common characters, feature the doings of the iconoclastic hobbyist as inventor, Uncle Edward. In 'Starlight' he captures a stellar being, an event that transforms the life of his nephew, who is given a glimpse of the numinous only to see it cruelly snatched away leaving him dissatisfied for ever after. Beautifully written, with compelling characterisation and a sense of wonder, this is a superb story, but also something of a closed circuit, and by using the characters again Lees somewhat dilutes the effect. Each story stands alone but comparisons are inevitable and not wholly beneficial, as with 'Oi' which changes most of the details but can't disguise the fact that, in all of the essentials, it's basically 'Starlight' all over again, using a different mechanism to attain the same end. That's certainly not true of the third Uncle Edward story, 'Jinner and the Shambly House', which has that worthy recounting a childhood adventure in which he and some friends went to a local edifice with an inauspicious reputation and what came of their visit. The story is a tour de force of invention, Lees packing the narrative

with telling detail and giving a whole new twist to the genre standard in which children visit a haunted house with dire results, the bittersweet but chilling denouement a masterpiece of wry understatement.

At least initially, 'The Anti-Fan' brings to mind the King novella 'Secret Window, Secret Garden' as a successful comedian is accused of plagiarism by a fan, with even the character's name (Mike Downey) echoing that of Mort Rainey, but as the story progresses something different emerges, an unsettling evocation of the true price of fame that in its closing moments shifts closer to Bradbury classic *The Crowd* but is uniquely Lees' own. Another highlight of the collection, 'Everybody's Crazy in the West' shares a similar concern with the fragility of popular culture, as an on his uppers film writer called Jimbo is drafted in by Hollywood to write the story behind this year's big movie, which features real dinosaurs, and given a chance to test his theory that film has so permeated life there's a kind of seepage from one to the other, resulting in a friability of the collective consciousness itself and blurring of the boundaries, as Jimbo is reduced to bit player in the film of his own life.

With six more stories as part of the package, this is a strong collection from a talented new writer, and may well be the most significant volume to come from Elastic Press since Marion Arnott's *Sleepwalkers*.

THE VEGETABLE LAMB

BY MATTHEW FRANCIS

ILLUSTRATED BY ALFRED KLOSTERMAN

A hot evening in Xanadu. Even on the edge of the city, where the foothills begin and there are shady pine groves and gardens purple with mallows, there is a heaviness in the air. It feels as if there is going to be a storm soon, but the Consul's wife knows from experience that it can stay like this for weeks without ever breaking. In the mountains, summer storms are common – you can see the lightning sometimes from the garden – but they dissipate before they can get this far. The garden only stays green because the servants water it with water from the picturesque rill, an artificial channel cut by a former Consul from the sacred river half a mile away.

At this time of year, the Consulate in the city is manned by a skeleton staff, and the Consul only drops in for pressing business, returning to his summer cabin to sleep. This is the summer suburb, where all the politicians and businessmen take up residence in the hot season. The cabins have rough, knotty walls through which any draughts can pass, and an overpowering smell of resin, but they're also rather grand, consisting of complexes of separate buildings. The Consul regularly gives dinners for twenty or more on the grill terrace outside the cabin he calls his drawing room. There is a dinner planned for tonight, in fact, and the Consul's wife is checking the preparations at this moment. The long table is laid, the mosquito screens have been checked for damage, the barbecues are beginning to smoke. As for the meat, that is in the kitchen cabin, marinating in olive oil, garlic and herbs. The servants will bring it out at the appropriate time, parading through the dark garden in their white jackets, and taking up their stations at the barbecues. To accompany, a selection of salads and breads; to start, a chilled soup of avocado pears; to follow, the first oranges of the year, with ginger in syrup that has been flown out from London in the diplomatic bag.

She is about forty, slim, with dark hair and eyes that make her look gypsyish, though she actually comes from one of the better families of the South Downs. At present she is wearing a simple blue afternoon dress, but she is planning to change into something slightly more impressive for the dinner. They eat late here, because of the heat, and she has nothing much to do for the next hour or so, as the servants are taking care of all the preparation. It is getting dark in the garden, and the fireflies are starting to flicker on the edge of the pines. They always make her think of invisible men waving cigarettes.

She moves round the table, checking the place settings again, though she knows they are all right. Every now and then she goes to the mosquito screen and looks out into the dusk, as if expecting something.

Beyond the foothills of the summer suburb, the mountains begin, grassy and empty. The sheep winter in the valleys between, and are driven out in the first fine days of May by bare-legged shepherds to their summer pastures in the uplands. It is a hard life in those high places. The shepherds live in caves, or in rough shelters of stone and moss. At night, even in July and August, the temperature can fall to freezing, while by day the sun is scorching, and there are also the thunderstorms, accompanied sometimes by drenching rain, sometimes by hailstones large enough to break bones. Not surprisingly, many of the sheep die in these conditions, either from the hail, exposure or falls from the precipices, but enough survive to return in the autumn. Besides, those that die are not wasted, being butchered on the spot and either roasted and eaten immediately or salted and dried for later consumption.

The world of the shepherds is closed to women, who never venture out into the hills, and indeed other Tartarean men know little about it. Most of them can play a bone pipe or a zither, and all have a fund of memorized songs, stories and bawdy jokes, which are recited round the fire every year. Since they are away from home so long, the shepherds know how to cook, and the food of the summer pastures is quite different from the domestic fare of town and village, based not only on fresh or preserved mutton but also on a variety of herbs, roots and aromatics that can only be gathered in the hills. There is a vegetable that resembles a parsnip, and another not unlike a cabbage. There are berries, too, never eaten alone, but always as an accompaniment to the meat, for food in those wild parts does not come artificially segregated into courses; one eats while there is still food to be eaten, and then one sings, or sleeps. The mulberry, staple of rich men's gardens, grows wild here, and is said to be far superior to suburban varieties; there are orange berries of the bogs something between a cranberry and a cloudberry in fragrance, though too tart for most Western palates; and, sweeter, a high mountain berry like a bilberry, but larger, jet black in colour and rather poisonous-looking. These are smeared on roast lamb as a relish, much as we might eat redcurrant jelly, or, if the meat is mutton, boiled with it to form a sharp sauce.

Then there is the vegetable lamb.

It is the vegetable lamb that has brought her to Tartary. She is not what they would call real diplomat material, despite her good blood. At sixteen she ran away from home with an unsuitable young man, the first of what she refers to as her semi-elopements, and they lived in France for a long autumn, looking for truffles with a rented pig. Since then, she has moved across Europe and beyond, getting into a few scrapes in the War years, collecting lovers and recipes. She has tasted the ortolan, a nocturnal bunting that is brought up in the darkness of a box to make it eat constantly, then, when it has stuffed down enough corn to reach perfect rotundity, drowned in brandy. The roasted birds are eaten under a cloth so none of the fragrance can escape, and bones and all, if a creature that has led such a life can be said to have any. And, in her North African phase, she tasted the heart of the date palm, which is

KLOSTERMAN

served only at the most important feasts, a monstrous growth between ten and twenty pounds in weight, delicately coloured in many shades of green, orange and white, with a flavour composed of banana, pine and green almond. All this she has written down in a manuscript that will be part memoir, part cookbook, and will make her famous some day. Meanwhile she is a diplomatic wife more or less by accident. When she met Geoffrey, she was scrounging off friends in the British colony, cooking for their dinner-parties and working on her book. Geoffrey helped with the matter of her passport, and it seemed a good idea to settle down for a bit.

One of her strangest experiences on arriving at the Consulate in Xanadu was to be taken by Dolgiz to the cellar and shown, in a small alcove beyond the racks of port and claret, a pyramid of cans, many of them rusty and missing their labels, gleaming in the light from the bare bulb.

"What are these, Dolgiz?"

"Soup, Madam."

"What kind of soup?"

He did not know the English word. Dolgiz had been accustomed, in Geoffrey's bachelor days, to a comfortable life of heating up the contents of such tins with, perhaps, a sprinkling of curry powder for variety. He is not really a cook at all, but a sort of orderly and quartermaster, happiest when sharpening knives and arranging the contents of cupboards; an urbanite in a land where women habitually run the kitchen, he is rather terrified of organic matter. Even a caterpillar on a lettuce can cause a personal crisis, and she has known him to leave the kitchen and refuse to come back for hours on being asked to deal with a simple dish of tripe.

Over the course of several frustrating bedtime conversations, she gathered that Geoffrey had bought the soup in a job lot from an English company that cleared out of Xanadu in a hurry when the abortive uprising took place a couple of years earlier, and had been serving it at dinners ever since. "It's perfectly good soup," he told her. "Besides, I like celery soup."

Geoffrey is unable to understand her attitude to food. Like most Scots, he was brought up to be thrifty, and, like the upper-class Englishmen with whom he attended school and university, he has been exposed from an early age to culinary atrocities which have dulled his tastes. In the early days of their marriage, he lectured her many times about her habit of going to the market alone, and haggling over oranges and peppers for the maids to pick up later. "I suppose you know they call you the Mad *Ingliza*? Well, why do you do it, Selena? It's what we have servants for."

Useless to explain to him that the market is the focus of all life in Xanadu. Not for him those chilly dawns in the Pyaz, the stallholders all muffled in overcoats, the colour drained from their wares leaving them like sculpted marble simulacra of fruit and vegetables, the gibbets hung with the legs, heads and intestines of animals, the foreign voices gabbling all round. For her, on the other hand, the market-place, whether in Xanadu or in Marseilles, Syracuse, Paxos, or any of the other places she has briefly called home, is where she is most alive. She has been a Mad *Ingliza*, digging her fingers into bins of seeds and husks, asking for news of the latest spices, since she was a girl. She has no intention of changing her habits for a life of celery soup.

The telephone rings in the drawing room, and she goes inside to answer it. "Geoffrey, where are you?"

"Darling, I'm at the Embassy. May be a bit late. Start without me."

"How late, Geoffrey?"

"No way of knowing. Sorry. And the Hillmans won't be coming. They've had to leave in a hurry."

"Geoffrey, what on earth is going on? It's summer. You shouldn't even be working at this time of year."

"Lot going on today. Too much to explain. Absolutely nothing to worry about, though. Sorry, darling." He sounds distracted.

She puts down the telephone, making an annoyed humming noise to herself, and presses the electric bell that is supposed to sound in the servants' quarters. There is no response, but then she is never quite sure that it works anyway. Well, it's early yet. They can remove the place-settings for the Hillmans later.

A man is singing at the bottom of the garden. He sounds drunk. It is a song she has heard before, on her morning visits to the Pyaz, mournfully nasal with lots of bent notes. It was sung by a woman then, and she assumed it was something about lost love, and how men always betray women, though her Tartarean was not good enough to make anything of the words. It sounds grossly ironic in a man's voice, as if he is parodying it. What is a drunken man doing down there, anyway? She should get the servants to shoo him away, in fact she will if he's still there when she gets back from dressing for dinner. She knows she is lingering too long here, but a cool breeze has sprung up in the last few minutes, and she is beginning to enjoy the darkness, the smell of charcoal, the in-between feeling. Her lover Roderic is coming tonight, the first time she has dared to invite him.

Roderic is small and boyish, with Etonian vowels and Tartarean eyes and just the faintest touch of gold in his complexion. She knows less about his background than she should, having met him in the Pyaz over the bins of chillies and asafoetida early one morning, and spent a series of guilty afternoons in his tiny flat full of sacks of potatoes and vats of fermenting apricot wine. He made her laugh by handing her his card in bed, though he was quite serious about it; it described him as an exporter and importer of foodstuffs. He knew without asking about her interest in the vegetable lamb. No, he said, he had never seen one, but he knew a fellow that might be able to get some of the preserved meat. Preserved how, pickled? He thought not, probably dried, in slices, like biltong. You can eat it just as it is, or soak it in boiling water, when it goes soft and fluffy. Quite a good flavour, he'd heard, though different from the fresh. One of the things that keeps her coming back to that flat, covering her face with a scarf as she dodges through a succession of washing-hung court-yards and climbs the rickety fire escape to the top floor, is the promise of that dried vegetable lamb, which he will have waiting for her next time, but which she knows by his smile as he opens the door hasn't turned up yet.

Roderic finally took her on a long and dangerous afternoon drive to a slumped stone village deep in the foothills to meet his 'fellow', a tough, shrivelled Tartarean called Barometz, who explained, in Roderic's excited translation, that he was about to start his yearly journey to the interior in search of new specimens. If she ordered a lamb, she could have it when he got back, not exactly fresh, but not exactly dried either. "They don't go off," Roderic said, "not in the way actual meat does." And last night he had telephoned – fortunately Geoffrey was in town – to say that the lamb had arrived, and he had seen it. "Darling, it's beautiful. You've never seen anything like it. It's exactly the way Marco Polo described it. Must go, see you tomorrow."

Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh passpxrrhs

A course on its own, perhaps, the way the French serve *charcuterie*, after the soup? It would be the talk of Xanadu, though she is not particularly interested in having a social triumph. Nor, on the other hand, does she want to keep the lamb to herself – she loves food, but has never been greedy about it. Besides, she has her doubts about exactly how delectable it really is. Most of the reports date from the middle ages, when people had some peculiar tastes: the meat is like fish, apparently, and the blood like honey. It is probably more of a curiosity than anything – it's just that she needs it for her book. It is the last of the delicacies.

The first guests will be here in half an hour, and Selena finally rouses herself and goes back to her cabin to dress. In her absence, the darkness seems to increase. Insects are battering thickly at the mosquito screen, trying to get at the electric lights. In the more extreme blackness of the woods, the fireflies are forming and reforming their low-flying constellations. There are the signs of a storm in the distance, a flickering in the sky and the muffled noise of thunder. The voice at the bottom of the garden continues to sing about the man who has deserted him, left him alone in his little village to drown himself in the fast-flowing river, except that he has been joined by another voice now, and they no longer sound drunk, but more like men who are trying to start a chorus, work up a bit of communal enthusiasm; they sing slowly, with great emphasis, slightly out of phase with each other. The lights are on in the servants' quarters, but the door stays shut, and no Dolgiz or Orzic emerges to clear up the place settings for the Hillmans or carry out little dishes of peanuts and olives. There is an odd atmosphere, busy on the edges where it should be still, still in the centre, where it ought to be busy. Then the telephone starts ringing in the drawing room.

She is wearing a festive red that matches her lipstick, and her heels are long enough to be elegant without being quite sharp enough to catch in the gaps between the planks. She has missed three telephone calls already while fastening the dress (on her own, for the maids have gone missing, too) and doing her face. The servants should have been here ages ago. Just as she is preparing to go to their quarters and shout them out the telephone rings again.

The voice on the other end is Tartarean. "Mrs Crawford," it says, "Mrs Crawford."

"Yes, who is that?"

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh."

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that. Could you speak a little louder, please?"

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh of the Interior. It is about the passports."

"What about the passports? Whose passports? It's a very bad line."

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh bad time. Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrh about yxrrh husband."

"Geoffrey? What about him?"

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh passpxrrhs."

"Yes, if you have any enquiries about passports, the place to call is the Consulate. In town. Not here, this is a private residence. I'll give you the number, if you like. It's – "

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh line. Will ring back."

"Oh, all right." She puts the receiver down, and waits for a few minutes, but the call does not come. She may have misunderstood the man when she thought he said he was going to call again. Or the line may have given up the ghost altogether. The thought crosses her mind that it could have been someone important, and that she was a little short with him. But after all, she is in a hurry. The guests will be arriving any moment. She has no time to answer telephone calls.

She slips out of the porch on to the sinuous path that connects the cabins. It is supposed to be well-lit here, because the servants must walk up it bearing food and drinks, but several of the bulbs have failed. No time to replace them now – Dolgiz must see to it in the morning. The door of the kitchen cabin is ajar, soft light spilling out. She pushes it open.

The cabin is simply furnished, with a woodfired stove in one corner and, in another, a metal-lined larder in which the soup and oranges are resting. Strings of onions, garlic bulbs and peppers hang from the rafters. In the middle of the room is a great pine table laden with shallow, cloth-covered pottery bowls full of oily meat: beef, pork, chicken and the ubiquitous lamb. Lemons are scattered among them, some cut in half, together with bunches of fresh and dried herbs and little piles of chopped parsley. She picks up a kitchen knife, its blade decorated with a smudge of lemon juice and chopped leaves. The scene might be a painting. If only there were some skilful watercolourist present, to capture it for the cover of her book; it would be hard to find a better image for the life she has lived, its sensuousness and earthy confusion. But no illustrator could depict that smell of lemon, herbs, garlic and meat juices with pinewood underlying everything and a hint of smoke creeping in from outside. If she were in England now – well, she would not be expected to go near the kitchen in any case, but it would make no difference, the smells would permeate the entire house, boiled cabbage, boiled tapioca, steamed puddings, all mixing together with the laundry. Why is it that in England everything must be boiled? Perhaps for us cooking and laundry really do belong together; the food must be sanitized before it is brought to the table.

Dolgiz and Orzic are nowhere to be seen. For a moment the thought is quite exciting: she will do the cooking herself, carrying the meat to the barbecue, getting the guests to help, as if they were all peasants together. That is how it ought to be done – there is very little pleasure in food unless you are prepared to get your hands dirty. But no, she is the Consul's wife, and must go and call the

servants to order. Lying on their backs in their cabin no doubt, smoking their disgusting cheroots. But as she turns to leave, she finds herself reluctant to step out again into the dark, and even more so to head off further down the path away from her own living quarters. She stands at the door listening for the singers. Nothing. No, wait a moment, there is a sound except that it is not singing any more but an instrument, thin and hollow-sounding, playing the same sad tune. She recognizes it as a bone pipe, having heard a beggar playing one occasionally. It is faint, and disappears altogether for a while, so that she wonders if she has heard it at all, but then it returns, stronger and in a different rhythm, choppy and jaunty, though the tune has not changed. Well, she has to go down there to shout out the servants, and when she does she will just shout out those singers and the piper as well. Then the telephone rings again in the drawing room and she runs back up the path to answer it.

"Selena."

"Rodericj, darling, I wish you would hurry up. I'm having quite a peculiar evening. Geoffrey isn't here, and the servants have gone missing, and the guests will be here any moment – "

"Selena, I'm sorry. I can't come tonight. Very busy. Sorry about it, but – "

"Rodericj, what do you mean? Of course you must come. I've been waiting months to invite you. This is our special evening. And what about the vegetable lamb?"

"Oh, the vegetable lamb?" Rodericj sounds confused, as if he's not quite sure for a moment what she's talking about. And isn't there some whispering going on in the background?

"Rodericj? Have you got anyone with you?"

"Of course not, darling." Whisper, whisper, whisper.

She is angry suddenly. "Listen, Rodericj, I don't care if you've got anyone with you or not. I'm too old to play boyfriends and girlfriends. And I'm married anyway, if it comes to that. I just wanted you to be here tonight. I expected it of you. You had a . . . an official invitation, from the Consul. It was the least you could do."

"Um, there's nobody here. Selena – "

"What?"

"About the vegetable lamb." He sounds out of breath, perhaps even panicky. "I spoke to Barometz, all right? He's bringing it himself. This evening. Because I can't come. You will have it."

"I don't care about the bloody vegetable lamb, Rodericj. To tell you the truth, I don't believe it exists, and I don't care whether it does or not. I just want to know what's going on."

"You will have it," Rodericj repeats. And then, echoing her, "It's the least I can do." He hangs up without saying goodbye.

She is surprised to find that there are tears in her eyes. She must be getting worse at these moments. She wasn't even aware that she had any feelings for Rodericj except amusement at his enthusiasms. Hardly one of her great loves, anyway. She is just a little stung at having had the brush-off that way, over the telephone at a time when everything else seems to be going wrong. It's the last straw, somehow.

Already, a car is drawing up on the gravel parking area over to the side of the cabin. The first guest. Damn, damn, damn. She hopes it will be someone military. Then she can come over helpless and get him to shout those people out for her. She runs out on to the grill terrace and tries to make out who is in the car. The headlamps are still on, dazzling her, and no one shows any sign of getting out. Perhaps she should go down and welcome whoever it is, in the absence of any servants to do the honours. As she hesitates, the telephone rings again.

"Who is it?"

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrh."

"Not again, please. I'm sorry, I can't talk. And you obviously mustn't telephone on this line, it just doesn't work."

"Xhrrhusband. Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhat once."

"I'm sorry, I can't understand a word you're saying, and I must go."

She is aware of the noise of a car behind, not arriving, but starting up. She turns round and moves as far as she can towards the window without actually putting the receiver down. The car that arrived a moment ago is leaving again. The sight gives her the bizarre feeling that time is running backwards – not that the car is actually reversing, of course. Meanwhile the voice continues to roar and crackle in her ear.

"What's that? I'm sorry."

"Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhnow. Xhrrhxhrno delay. Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhonce. Please. Now."

The voice is cut off. At the same moment the light goes out. She gropes her way to the grill terrace, only to find that the lights are out there, too, and in the other cabins. The only light comes from the orangey glow of the barbecues. Even the fireflies down in the pinewoods seem to have been extinguished. The singing has returned at the bottom of the garden, this time with many voices, like a male voice choir. In the distance, the storm is still flashing and booming, but isn't it in the wrong direction, over the city rather than the mountains? She watches it, unable to move for a moment, remembering a similar experience in France, and another in Greece. So it's starting again. They seem to be following me about, she thinks, the gunfire and explosions. Perhaps some people are like that; there are people who attract lightning. But that's ridiculous – after all, she is perfectly all right, while Geoffrey and Rodericj are in the thick of it. She must go in at once, and telephone. But still she is unable to move. The singing at the bottom of the garden has been slowly shifting its position, and now it appears to be coming from the servants' quarters. The electric light has not resumed, but there is some illumination down there now, torches probably. There are other sounds, too, scuffling and the occasional thump or crash, as if they are throwing their beds round the cabin.

Finally she returns to the drawing room, locks the door behind her, and makes her way, half crawling, to the telephone. The line is dead. And to think she has been cursing it all evening. Well, she has been in worse spots than this. In Greece she was only a few hours ahead of the Germans, and had to leave everything she had behind. She doesn't even know for certain that anything is happening yet, just noises and lights, and absence of lights. But something is happening, and this time there is nowhere to go.

There is a heavy step on the grill terrace, a man's step, and Selena braces herself. "Madam," a voice calls.

Naturally, she doesn't answer. They may not know she is there.

"Madam." Now there is a knock on the door. She does not move.

"Madam. It is Barometz. I bring it."

A trick. She doesn't reply.

"Madam, I bring lamb, vegetable lamb. Please, open door."

Xhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhxhrrhonce please

The vegetable lamb, or lycopodium, is to be found only in the highest and most remote grasslands of Tartary, an area where even the shepherds seldom venture. Sir John Mandeville describes it as a plant bearing large pods, each of which, when split open, contains a perfect miniature lamb. According to other, more reliable accounts, there is only one lamb, and the plant consists of a rosette of dark green, hairy leaves, out of which, every seven years, a long spiky stalk grows. A single flower forms, white and about the size of a soup-plate. It has an odd, savoury smell which attracts flies in huge numbers for the month or so that it remains in bloom. Then it begins to go woolly, turning eventually into a ball of fluff, which extends from the flower on a sucker, inching towards the ground. When it is nearly touching, the bud starts to develop legs and a head, and by the time it has reached, there is a fully formed lamb, still joined to the mother plant by a cord of stalk. It is another week before it is sufficiently developed to move, but then it begins to feed, cropping the grass in a perfect circle around its pivot. It can survive like this for several years, growing bigger and stronger, if it is only allowed to live, but most are eaten by wolves, and a very few are taken by hunters like Barometz, who kill it easily just by cutting the cord. The wool is said to be more precious even than the meat, as fine and warm as vicuña, but as it takes dozens of lycopodiums to make a single coat, few people have ever seen one. The meat, though, is a different matter. If you were to make your way to Tartary, which has been closed to tourists for many years, you might just find a carcass on sale in the Pyaz. If you are exceptionally lucky, it might even be fresh.

The meat is sometimes described as tasting like fish, which only means that, in its dried and reconstituted form at any rate, it is soft and in itself rather bland. But fresh and eaten raw, the fibres oozing with blood, if that dark sticky juice can be called blood, the flavour is extraordinary, more like honey than anything else, but honey that is as fragrant as lavender, as dizzying as burgundy. A curiosity, you might say, but what a curiosity. It is worth seeking out.

Matthew Francis is the author of one novel, *Whom*, but is better known as a poet – he has published two collections with Faber, and was recently named on the Next Generation list of the twenty best poets to emerge in the last ten years. Although many of Matthew's stories have fantastic elements (he is also a keen SF reader), this is the first he's written that he would classify as fantasy.

HOUSE OF THE

Sycorax smiled at me through the mantilla shadowing her eyes: eyes untouched by that smile. She lolled against a wrought-iron railing, one narrow hip thrust out, dyed red hair tumbling out of the black spiderweb of her shawl, looking like a Mac Rebenak song come to life.

The dead quickly grow thin.

She licked her lips with a long pale tongue and even the semblance of amusement fell away. "You're pale, Tribute. No coup tonight?"

"Nothing appealed." Tribute wasn't my real name any more than Sycorax was hers.

She leaned into me, pressed a hand to my throat. Her flesh lay like ice against the chill of my skin. "I told you to hunt."

"I hunted." Backing away, red nails trailing down my chest. I hunted. Hunted and returned emptyhanded. It's as much how you hear the orders as how they're given.

She followed close on my steps, driving me before her. Ragged black chiffon clung and drifted around her calves; she reached up to lace china fingers in the fine hairs at the nape of my neck. Her face against my throat was waxen: too long unfed. "You weaken me on purpose, Tribute. Give me what you have."

She needed me, needed me to feed. Old as she was, she had to have the blood more often and she couldn't take it straight from a human anymore. She needed someone like me to purge the little taints and poisons from it first – and even then, I had to be careful what I brought home. So sensitive, the old.

She caught at my collar, pulled it open with fumbling hands. I leaned down to her – chattel, blood of her blood, no more able to resist her will than her own right hand, commanded to protect and feed her. At least this time, I knew what sort of predator I served, although I had less choice about it.

I figured things out too late, again.

Sycorax curled cold lips back from fangs like a row of perfect icicles, sank her teeth into my flaccid vein and tried to drink. All that pain and desire spiked through me – every time like the first time – and on its heels a

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIKE BOHATCH

STORY BY
ELIZABETH BEAR

hollowness. Sycorax hissed, drew back. She turned her head and spat transparent fluid on the cobbles. I smiled as she turned on me, spreading my hands like Jesus on a hilltop, still backing slowly away. I had made very sure that I had nothing to feed her on.

Petty, I know. And she'd make me pay for it before dawn.

Down the narrow lane, a club's red door swung open and I turned with a predator's eye, attracted to the movement. Spill of light cut like a slice of cake, booted feet crunching on glittering glass. Girls. Laughing, young, drunk. I remembered what that felt like.

I raked a hand through my forelock and looked away, making the mistake of catching Sycorax's china-blue eye.

"Those," she said, jerking her chin.

I shook my head. "Too easy, baby. Let me get you something more challenging." I used to have an accent – down home Mississippi. Faded by the years, just like everything else. I suspected I sounded pan-European now, like Sycorax; I've put some effort into changing my speech patterns. Her lips, painted pale to match china white skin, curled into a sulk.

"Tribute. After a quarter of a century, you ought to know I mean what I say."

I tugged my collar, glancing down.

"Them." Sycorax twisted a stiletto-heeled boot, crushing the litter of cracked glass against the bricks.

She enjoyed the hunt a little too much. But who but a madwoman would have drained *my* living body and made me hers? Just fetching my corpse from the grave would have taken insane effort.

"I'm hungry," she complained while I sharpened my teeth on my lip to stop a malicious smile.

If I could buy a little time, the girls might make it to the street and I could lose them in the crowds and tangled shadows of the gaslamp district. Footsteps receded down the alley; I spread my hands in protest, cocking my head to one side and giving her the little half-smile that used to work so well on my wife. "Something with a little more fight in it, sweetie."

My wife was a hell of a lot younger than Sycorax. "Those two girls. Bring me their blood, Tribute. That's an order."

And that was the end of the argument. I turned to obey.

"Tribute."

Coming back around slowly, her gaze – catching mine – flat and pale. "Sycorax."

"I could just spike your pretty eyes out on my pinkie finger and eat them, lovely boy," she purred. "Hazel, aren't they?"

"Blue."

She shrugged and made an irritated, dismissive gesture, hands white as wax. "It's so hard to tell in the dark."

The girls made it to the street before Sycorax ended the discussion, but I had to follow them anyway. I paced my ordained prey, staying to the shadows, the collar of the black leather trenchcoat that Sycorax had picked out for me tugged up to half-hide the outline of my jaw. I never would have bought that coat for myself. You'd think anybody who'd been dead for any time at all would have had enough of blackness and shadows, thank you very much. Sycorax reveled in it. If she were three hundred years younger, she'd have been a gothchick.

It was a good night: nobody turned for a second look.

People are always dying, and human memory is short. In a hundred years, I shall probably be able to walk down any street in the world without raising an eyebrow.

As long as the sun is down.

Sycorax didn't bother to follow. I had no choice but to do as I was bid. It's more than a rule; it's a fact. I expected there were still a few women I knew who would get a kick out of that.

My girls staggered somewhat, weaving. One was a blonde, brittle dyed hair and a red beret. The other one had glossy chestnut brown waves and the profile of a little girl. I tracked them through the district toward the ocean, neon glow and littered sidewalks. A door would open and music would issue forth, and it wasn't long before I found myself mouthing the words to one particular song.

There's something gloriously ironic in a man charting a number-one hit twenty-five years after he's dead. *Otis*

Redding, eat your heart out.

My quarry paused at an open-air patio where a live band played the blues. Girl singer, open coat and a spill of curls like wicked midnight: performing old standards, the kind I've always loved.

> *Mama, tell my baby sister, not to do what I have done. I'll spend my life in sin and misery, in the House of the Rising Sun.*

A song that was already venerable when Eric Burdon made it famous.

There's all kinds of whoredom, aren't there? And all kinds of bloodsuckers, too.

The singer nailed 'Amazing Grace' *a capella* like heartbreak, voice sharp and gritty as little Mary Johnson doing 'Cold, Cold Heart'. I caught myself singing along and slashed my tongue with needle teeth before someone could overhear. Still no blood. I hadn't fed in a long time and it hurt more than it should have.

The girls sat down at a table and ordered food. I smelled beer, hot wings, eyewatering garlic. I suddenly very badly wanted a peanut butter sandwich and a milkshake.

Leaning against the high black iron fence, I watched the girls watching the band until a passerby in her fifties turned to get a startled better look at me. I stood up straight and met her gaze directly, giving her the crooked little-kid smile. It almost always works, except on Sycorax.

Trying to hide your face only convinces them they've seen something.

"Sorry," she said, waving me away with a smile. A moment later, she turned back. "You know you look like – "

"People say," I answered, pitching my voice high.

"Amazing." She nodded cheerfully, gave me a wide wondering grin, and continued on her way. I watched her go, chattering with her friends, shaking their heads.

The girls didn't stay for 'King of the Road', although I would have liked to hear the version.

Kids.

I almost turned away when they walked past. They stank of garlic-stuffed mushrooms and beer. The reek of the herb knotted my stomach and seared my eyes. I actually tried to take a half-step away before the compulsion Sycorax had laid on me locked my knees and forced me back into pursuit.

They walked arm in arm, skinny twenty-year-olds with fake ID and black vinyl miniskirts. Cheap boots, too much eyeliner. The one with the brown hair broke my heart every time she tossed her head, just that way. I let myself drift ahead of them, taking a gamble on where they would cut across the residential neighborhood near the ocean: a dangerous place for girls to be.

I ducked down a side street to cut them off and waited in the dark of an unlit doorway. Sycorax's control permitted that much. I leaned against the wall, scrubbing my face against my hands. It felt like a waxen mask, cold and stiff. My hands weren't much better.

They weren't long. I was unlucky. They picked the better of the two routes through the brownstones, the one I had been able to justify choosing, and just that innocently chose their fate.

The scent of bougainvillea and jacaranda filled the spaces of the night. I watched them skipping from streetlight to streetlight, shadows stretched out behind them, catching up, and then reaching before. The brown-haired one walked a few steps ahead of the bleach-blonde, humming to herself.

I couldn't help it. It wasn't one of my standards, but every blues singer born knows the words to that one. Hell, I used to have a horse by that name.

I picked up the tune. I had to.

> *. . . they call the Rising Sun. It's been the ruin of many a poor boy. And me, O God, I'm one!*

Their heads snapped up. Twenty, maybe. I was dead before they were born. Gratifying that they recognized my voice.

> *Fellas, don't believe what a bad woman tells you – though her eyes be blue, or brown . . .*

I strolled out of the shadows, ducking my head and smiling, letting the words trail away.

The dark-haired girl did a doubletake. She had a lovely nose, pert and turned up. The blonde blinked a couple of times, but I don't think she made the connection. I'd changed my appearance some, and I'd lost a lot of weight.

The stench of garlic on their breath would have thickened my blood in my veins if I had any left. I swallowed hard, remembering all those songs about wandering ghosts and unquiet graves. Ghosts that all seem to want the same thing: revenge, and to lay down and rest.

I smiled wider. *What the lady wants, the lady gets.*

"Oh, wow," the darker girl said. "Do you have any idea how much you look like . . . "

The street was empty, dark and deserted. I came up under the streetlight, close enough to reach out and touch the tip of that nose if I wanted. I dropped them a look that used to melt hearts, sidelong glance under lowered lashes. "People say," I answered.

And, sick to my stomach, I broke their necks before I fed.

It was the least I could do.

Poison roiled in my belly when I laid them out gently in the light of that streetlamp, in the rich dark covering the waterfront, close enough to smell the sea. I straightened their spines so they wouldn't look so terrible for whoever found them, but at least *they* wouldn't be coming back.

It was happening already: my limbs jerked and shook. My flesh crawled with ripples like fire, my tongue numb as a drunk's.

> *I'm going back to New Orleans, to wear that ball and chain . . .*

Not this time. Struggling to smooth each step, to hide the venom flooding my veins, I hurried back to my poor, *hungry* mistress. I stole the brunette's wallet. I stopped and bought breath mints at the all-night grocery.

I beat Sycorax home.

THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth's stories have appeared in publications such as *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *SCIFICTION* and *Interzone*. Earlier this year her novel *Hammered* was published by Bantam Spectra, to great acclaim. This is her first appearance in TTA.

JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN

JOHN PAUL CATTON

Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Inspector Morse are alive and well – and living in Japan. Over here the traditional English mystery has always had a strong fan-base, and is currently enjoying a bit of a boom. Satellite and cable channels are offering a steady diet of crime dramas from the UK, USA and France, sales of tours to Baker Street and crime-related locations are going up, and a new anime TV series even puts Hercule Poirot and the sweet Miss Marple in the same stories, a kind of super-tec team-up catering to the insatiable Japanese hunger for high-class mystery.

Japanese suspense has always owed a heavy debt to the West. The leading award for homegrown crime fiction is the Edogawa Ranpo award, named after the successful mystery writer (real name Taro Hirai) who died in 1965. Hirai styled himself after Edgar Allen Poe, so much in fact that his pseudonym is the American writer's name written in the Japanese phonetic alphabet (Edgar Allen Poe becomes ed-o-gar-al-len-po and thus Edogawa Ranpo). Poe also turns up in Gosho Aoyama's detective manga series *Meitantei Conan*. The hero's surname is taken from Conan Doyle and his first name is Edogawa. In this hugely successful series, Conan is an adult criminologist whose mind is transferred to the body of an elementary student – thus effortlessly combining the school-story and mystery genres.

The current best-selling mystery novelist in Japan is a 74-year-old gentleman named Kyotaro Nishimura. Born in Tokyo in 1930, Nishimura has been putting out crime novels at a an incredibly prolific rate since his first novel *Carriage 3015* in 1964, usually starring Inspector Totsugawa and his long-suffering deputy Sergeant Kamei. Recently a museum has opened up dedicated to Nishimura's life in Kanagawa, west of Tokyo.

One distinctive feature of Nishimura's fiction is the prominent role of trains. Instead of car chases and big explosions, the Japanese mystery reflects national lifestyles and obsessions – and solving a baffling murder will often depend on studying the intricacies of the public transport timetables. Many other writers, such as Seicho Matsumoto (author of *Points and Lines*), have followed suit, also using trains as major plot devices in their own work.

The Japanese mystery has perhaps reached its purest form in the two-hour TV drama, and a look at a few of these reveals some interesting similarities between Japan and the UK. Just as the British countryside is the home of so many gruesome murders, as we see from the England of Miss Marple up to Detective Barnaby's Midsomer in the present day, most of Japan's *satsujin-jiken* (murder mysteries) take place in national parks, mountain resorts or famous hot springs. Some of them even go so far as to feature menus and cameo appearances by real-life hotel management.

Kyoto is also a hot site for high-society crime, with ancient legends of the nation's cultural capital being used to inspire modern ways to bump off the growing list of victims.

Guns are conspicuous by their absence, reflecting the reality of modern Japan, so police and perpetrator find other ways to commit violent acts upon each other.

The detectives can be both male or female, and are not always police officers – as well as lawyers and insurance investigators, Japanese chefs, calligraphers, hotel owners, undertakers, kimono makers and even gardeners have been adept at tracking down an elusive killer.

The stereotypical Agatha Christie climax sees the detective assemble all the suspects in a room, detail how the crime was committed, and then force the killer to reveal himself/herself. This tradition has evolved into the denouement of the Japanese TV mystery – the investigator corners the suspect outdoors, usually in a site of national beauty, very often a cliff-top. The sleuth reveals how and why the crime was done, provoking the criminal to burst into tears of repentance/pull out a knife and be subdued by uniformed cops who jump out from behind a nearby rock/ jump off the cliff/delete as applicable.

The Japanese TV murder-mystery is an art form as full of distinctive tropes and codes as Kabuki or Noh. Some of these can be traced back to their British literary forebears, but others are a little more idiosyncratic; namely, the motivations of the killer.

This reveals some unexpected facts about national identity, and is a meaty bone I'll be chewing on in the next column.

Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Inspector Morse are alive and well – and living in Japan. Over here the traditional English mystery has always had a strong fan-base, and is currently enjoying a bit of a boom. Satellite and cable channels are offering a steady diet of crime dramas from the UK, USA and France, sales of tours to Baker Street and crime-related locations are going up, and a new anime TV series even puts Hercule Poirot and the sweet Miss Marple in the same stories, a kind of super-tec team-up catering to the insatiable Japanese hunger for high-class mystery

Lago di Iniquità

Darren Speegle

"This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen." came the inevitable words from Lily's mouth. She was posed like the lover she was against the balcony's decorative railing, blouse revealing her midriff, the caressive June air as Italian as it was Alpine.

Her exact sentiment must have been expressed thousands of times, in a variety of different languages, from the balconies and terraces of the mountainside on which the village of Tignale had been built. The words nonetheless sounded recited to me, as if she had consulted my late wife's journal, or ghost, or my own nightmares prior to our departure from the States. I had the brief inexplicable urge to press my palm against the tanned arch of her back, to cause her to have a flutter of doubt about my intentions as I forced her to look at the stone building below.

How had we ended up here, in an apartment so close to the one I had stayed in with my family five years before? Of course there had been that risk when I selected a Tignale location out of the *Tui* vacation rental catalog, but what were the chances we would be within eyesight – indeed practically on top of – the Rustico Spagnol? Perhaps subconsciously I had remembered the name of our current spot, Cottage Mediterraneo, from the sign on the winding rutted road that led up from the lake. I dared not discuss these thoughts with Lily, for she would call it destiny, a flavor that did not linger well on my tongue.

"I told you you would like it," I said. Past the moment of danger, I placed my hand on the naked skin of her back, rubbing, consciously ignoring that her thong underwear were visible above the low-cut waist of her fashionable pants. In many ways I got along with her *in spite of* her attractive features and figure.

She turned to me, putting her sleeveless arms around my neck. "Yes, you did. Now I'm wondering how you're going to drag me away from here to see Florence and Venice."

It had that effect, the northern part of the Gardasee. Across the lake from us the lushly green slope, punctuated with granite bluffs and medieval church steeples, merely provided the foreground for the snow-capped peaks beyond. Lake Garda itself painted a blue-green glassy serenity, playground to sailing vessels and dinner boats, and the promise of an aesthetically-oriented God.

Lily was further evidence towards that promise, as amazing to my touch and awareness now as she had been the day I had found her deliberating over her studies outside my evening philosophy class. I had been more than willing to help her with the question about which she had been waiting to consult Dr Jessie (whose nickname spoke to an uncanny resemblance to the actress Jessica Lange), though I discovered for my efforts that my younger peer grasped its core meaning better than I did. Her reason for haunting the university after dinnertime was the textbook one; mine, on the other hand, had more to do with loneliness than education.

In a sense, I thought as I smelled Lily's hair, felt the years that separated us against my rough cheek, this trip was like that.

In other ways it was vastly different.

We did Florence, Venice, and Verona, in that order, during the first three full days of our seven-day vacation. In the presence of Michelangelo's *David* one reassessed one's opinions about the nature of things; all the superlatives, no matter how soulfully or originally uttered, became instant cliché. Lovers' Venice, with its watery streets and sighing bridges, was a much easier distraction. As was Verona, which ensnared one in Roman history rather than the elusive and delicate Renaissance.

Somewhere in the middle lay the dark ages, my real reason for being in Europe again. It wasn't Caesar or da Vinci who'd called me, but a medieval saint named Laguaro, of whom the world at large knew nothing: a wandering monk who had wept tears of olive oil into a secluded Alpine lake in what he termed a *valle di iniquità* – valley of iniquity. If he had attained any renown, it was among sinners like myself – us and our victims, our wives and our sons and daughters, wherever they had gone.

While Lily and I didn't often converse about these topics, she knew that demons were in the cards and elected to accompany me anyway. It might have been easier to think she wanted a free trip to Europe, the mildly satisfying company of a widower with a portfolio and a phobia for deeper attachments. But we had grown more than compatible over the last year and a half, such that the strange words had been floating around for months: life, marriage, baby. She had even been crude enough to suggest that this trip was a honeymoon. My soul, my conscience had the same idea, though with peace as the bride.

After hanging out by the pool and doing nothing on the fourth day, I invited Lily to ride up into the Dolomites with me on the fifth. She was duly surprised when I told her I wanted to spend the night in an Alpine village not more than an hour's drive north of the lake. To her credit, when I explained that I had always wanted to do an overnight in the mountains, she pretended to take me at face value.

We took our time, breakfasting on the balcony as we watched the low mist reluctantly give way to the windsurfers and sailors. Although the sky overhead looked promising, I suggested we carry both cool and warm attire. Aside from the fact that Garda created its own weather patterns, we were heading to higher elevations, where I had been surprised before.

Lily kissed me as we squeezed into the rental Fiesta. "You look sexy today, Tim." She always knew when to say what, pulling a smile out of the most subdued expression.

"We're going to need to stop and fill up," I told her as I let the engine idle, warming up the cool interior. "We don't want to be up there without petrol."

Had they had a station in Laguaro? I couldn't remember such details.

"You've been thinking about Kris and the kids a lot since we've been here," Lily said as we cruised along the narrow shore road, passing in and out of tunnels cut directly out of the rock, cowering from campers and buses compensating over the faded solid line. The occasional vineyards and lemon groves – their stone walls and winter housings often dating to Roman times – passed too quickly for contemplation.

"So I have," I said, keeping my eyes on the wily road.

"It's okay, you know . . . to talk."

"Truly, Lily, I'm not sure what there is to say." I pulled into a service station that sported a coat of arms logo and not even the pretense of a competitive fuel price.

"Say it pisses you off to pay these outrageous prices for gas," Lily said.

"It does, I assure you."

"Say it pisses you off that I ask questions."

"That too."

"Yet you invited me along."

"Yeah." I got out, only to find it was a full service, which I'd somehow missed.

Lily stepped out of the car, immediately engaging the guy in an argument over who was responsible for cleaning the windshield. I didn't care nearly as much as she did as I watched her storm away in the direction of the WC. If I couldn't expect to fill a Fiesta's fuel tank for less than sixty euros – which was seventy-plus dollars at the current exchange rate – I certainly shouldn't expect service.

She reemerged in record time, perhaps in an even more incensed mood than when she'd entered. I suspected she had found one of the hole-in-the-floor toilets she so despised, and was about to issue consolatory words when I saw a shape emerge from the men's bathroom behind her.

My heart forgot its cadence as his eyes met mine for a familiar moment before his weathered mustached features dissolved beneath the shadowy brim of his hat. The afterimage remained, like a flash from a dream: the vineyards worker looking forward to (or returning from – it made no difference) another stooped day in the sun. Indeed I *had* dreamed of the stranger, in photographs snapped from around sudden corners, or as he became visible from between rows of luxuriant vines. I had dreamed of that partially detailed face ever since my Italian vacation of five years before, when I had brought my wife and my children.

Then the attendant was asking for my money. Asking for my money at that exact moment, an eventuality so terribly typical of this recurrent experience. When I turned from stuffing the twenty notes in his greasy fist, the other man had vanished into reality – the driver's seat of a car, the restaurant next door, the pedestrian tunnel that led to the other side of the street. I looked in every direction, but he was nowhere to be seen.

As Lily stepped into my sphere I sensed that the change that visited her was to do with my change, that the stupor, the disorientation had reached out to her like a contagion.

"I hate those fucking toilets," she said, following my eyes around the place. "Goddamn piss splashed up on my legs and there were no towels."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Next time I'll go outside."

Up in the mountains you can do that. For some, the fluids fall from their bodies as olive oil.

I tried to explain the tradition to Lily as we drove the twisting roads up into the Dolomites, but my words made little sense even to me.

"Santo Laguaro said that his tears represented the sins of the iniquitous village he had found in the mountain valley. As olive oil can be removed from water without compromising its purity, so can our sins be removed from us. The custom is to pour a drop of olive oil into the Lago di Iniquità and reflect on a personal sin."

"And that's actually the name of the lake? They actually gave it that name because of a medieval monk's reference to a 'valley of iniquity'?"

"You'll find it on the map in your door sleeve."

"That's bizarre."

"Nonetheless."

"So why was the village given its Sodom status? What separated it from any from any other village?"

"I don't think that's ever explained. Maybe it was plague. Isolation. Excessive wine. Who knows?"

"What does this have to do with your family, Tim?"

There it was, in fire, the present tense speaking either to the violence involved or to my refusal to let go the memories after a half decade. The question, in all its nakedness, asked: *How does any of this figure into a random threesome dying at the hands of a random psychopath, across the Atlantic in America?*

To which I have never been able to give a convincing answer, even to myself, with my vineyards worker peeking 'randomly' over my shoulder at my sins. My silence did not disillusion her. She knew innately that to go into the mountains seeking specific answers, rather than simple validation, was folly. The mountains were about answers in the same way that they were not about them; they filled one's body with desire at the second, with cold at the minute. Lily accepted this truth with a wisdom that was greater than me.

As the lake came into view there were no more questions. Shining waterfalls fed down from the peaks rising above the opposite shore, barely disturbing the tranquil surface as they united with the Alpine pool. Like the last time I had driven this road, the structures that came into view at the far end of the oblong body of water seemed out of place. As pristine a picture as they painted, they still seemed an annoyance on the face of nature.

For once in my life I didn't care about money, selecting the hotel with the best view. We unloaded from a street that was like an incision in its meager width, and parked the Fiesta in a pocket of our future memory of the place. Our balcony looked over the sea of my nightmares, with an empty cruet on the table, and a complimentary bottle of wine that might have been a deterrent, or an element of ease.

We had the restaurant's terrace to ourselves as we lunched afternoon-style on cheese and bread and red wine. When I ended up having to ask the waiter for the oil, he was perturbed, as though by some magic the tradition in which the village was so steeped had evaporated during the last five years. I didn't understand, and demanded to know why there were empty cruets on all the tables then. He forgot English suddenly, looking down on us from aloft before primly striding away. Lily didn't know what to make of his behavior any more than I did.

Though she had questions. "Did you reflect over a sin back then, Tim? Is that what we're doing here?"

"Yes." The wine was like the mountains in its potentiality. "Yes, I reflected over a sin."

"Do you want to explain?" She sipped, and I saw the grape reds on her face, reflections of her European experience, its unsolicited mysteries.

The sun blazed out of a cloudless sky, counteracting the briskness off the lake. From behind my darkly tinted sunglasses I pondered the strangeness of Lily's presence. Her lips pouted her fashion of sobriety in my lenses, and I wished suddenly that I had not brought her here with me. Why had I? Was it fear? The need to fall back on someone?

"You've accused me," I said, "of being torn up with guilt about something I had no control over. Well, I may not have had control but I do have responsibility. You see, my sin . . . "

"Yes?"

"It had to do with my family."

"Go on," Lily said.

"Garan and Debs were always fighting. They were always being disrespectful to Kris and me. Particularly Debs, who was eleven at the time and felt the world revolved around her. She would hurt Kris with words, with disobedience, with actual physical bullying. Yet when I tried to punish her or her brother, Kris would come to their defense with the tears and blood running down her face. The family credo was dysfunction. I never understood what Kris and I did wrong aside from our differing parenting styles. I guess that was enough."

"Sounds like any middle class family to me," Lily said, watching herself in my shades. Her wisdom had a flavor about it that reminded me, not fondly, of Kris.

"The morning we'd planned to drive up into the Alps," I continued, "we started fighting, all four of us, *loudly*. God knows what the people staying in the neighboring apartments must have thought. In the end Kris did this thing she had a habit of doing, waving her arms in the air like so and telling me I should just go on without them. *Without* them, mind you. We are in the middle of our European vacation, having planned to take a drive into the Alps to hike and picnic and enjoy the scenery, and suddenly I'm going without them.

"I should have waited till everybody cooled, but I didn't. Basically I said fuck the bunch of you, I will go by myself and I will fucking enjoy it."

I paused to drink from my wineglass.

"Still," said Lily. "I've heard worse stories from my mother about my childhood."

I lifted my sunglasses so that she could see my eyes.

"I didn't mean to trivialize, Tim. Really."

"As I drove up the same roads you and I drove this morning, I had thoughts. It wasn't the first time I'd had them. I had thoughts about what it might be like to be alone."

"I'm not sure we haven't all – "

"I thought about what life would look like if my wife and children happened to meet a truck on their way to the supermarket in Tignale. I thought about freedom from burdens."

She grew quiet now, casting a sideways glance at the waiter as he arrived with the small pitcher of olive oil, which he set rudely on the table. As he walked away again, glancing back as if for any conclusion to this apocalyptic inconvenience, Lily said quietly, "And that was the sin you reflected on."

"The waiter," I said. "How old do you think he is?"

"What? I don't know, early thirties."

"I think he waited on me before."

"Didn't you say that you wouldn't normally pay for a place as expensive as this?"

"It was just me the last time I was here. And I hadn't necessarily intended to stay longer than it took to drink a beer."

"But the legend of Saint Laguaro inspired you?"

"Yeah."

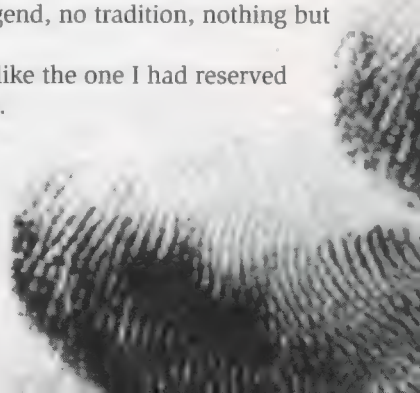
"Why is it that I see no legend, no tradition, nothing but your empty cruets?"

"Lily." My voice sounded like the one I had reserved for scolding Garan and Debs.

"Why, Tim?"

I stuck my finger in the only direction it could. "Ask him."

To my surprise she



turned and called: "Excuse me, waiter!"

He stopped in his tracks, stiffening before turning with a slight bow of his head. His face was admirably calm as he approached, but I could taste the steam nonetheless.

"Signora," he said to Lily as he arrived.

"My fiancé here" – she dared me under her brow to contradict her – "tells me that your village has a custom that has to do with the lake. Can you tell me about it?"

What was the purpose of this? I wondered. I wasn't quite sure why she required convincing. Did she think me a lunatic? A *rendered* man searching for reason in the wake – a five year long wake – of his family's death?

"Yes, signora," said the waiter. "The custom involves pouring a drop of olive oil from a vessel such as this into the lake, and to *muse* – this is the word? – about a past sin."

"And what is the purpose of doing this?"

"Surely, your *fiancé* has explained this to you."

"Why would you think so? Do you know my fiancé?"

"He has been here previously, yes." The waiter seemed uncomfortable in the lenses of my glasses.

"And what makes Tim so memorable to you after five years?"

The waiter turned a quarter turn so that he faced me directly. "He was drunk and loud, signora. When he returned from the lake he wished us to fill his bottle again. This is not okay, to pour *all* of the bottle's contents into the lake. When we did not honor his request, he became . . . angry. We asked him to leave the restaurant, but he refused. Santo Laguaro, he said, belonged to more than our little village. He was correct to say so, but he was bold to assume that Laguaro was his personal saint."

"What do you mean?" Lily said.

Yes, what do you mean, Leonardo?

"Perhaps, signora, you should ask your fiancé."

She looked at me.

"I don't remember," I said, in all my eloquence.

"You do not remember smashing the empty vessel against these tiles that I am now standing on?" said the waiter. "You do not remember telling the guests at another table to look at the shattered glass, to look at 'your family' on the floor?"

"I don't," I said quietly. "I don't."

And yet his words conjured images, thoughts, helped to separate the oil from the water. He had indeed been my waiter, and there had been an empty cruet on my table. That's where it had begun – not at the tourist office or in a brochure. It had started with a question.

Why is there an empty vase on each of the tables?

From there the tradition sprang, as if for only those customers tortured enough to ask. There had been no advertisements, no volunteered information, only the empty cruet – a bottle, a prop as clear and perceptive as Lily, who knew me better than *I* knew me, better than *Kris* knew me, almost better than *guilt* knew me.

"I'm sorry," I offered the waiter.

He shrugged slightly.

"I'm sorry for assuming Laguaro was my personal saint."

"Was he?" he said.

"More than you know."

We took the cruet down to the lakeside, Lily holding it like a funeral candle while I wondered why I hadn't brought my jacket like she had. The sun still hung superior over the mountains to our right, but the lake shimmered with an icy brilliance. As we stood on the pebbled shore, I turned to Lily.

"'Fiancé'?" I said.

"Yeah, why not? Could you ever hope for better than me?"

I thought about it as I took the glass candle from her. "Not in multiple lifetimes."

The waves lapped in, cold, clear, snow-born. I sat on the beach, tempting the water with the bottle for a couple minutes until at last I let the drop fall. My eyes closed as the foreign substance struck the water, and I forgot about Lily and Laguaro and the Alps for awhile. Forgot about confessions in favor of the therapeutic breathing of a 5am jog.

Without my mornings I never would have been able to cope with dadhood, nor discovered the meaning of being human. In addition to its skyscrapers and its CNN, Atlanta had its parks and birds, which provided the setting for my regular loop. That morning was no different than any other pleasant spring morning – a diversion, an aviary and a botanical gardens to my senses. I thought nothing of the fact that Kris hadn't been in bed beside me when I woke. She often slept on the couch where the darkness of her nightmares somehow couldn't reach.

Then I saw the leg protruding from between the bushes, and the cap that Garan always wore, lying by his ankle. The wish that had remained so well submerged now surfacing in blood, the blood of more than a sacrificial boy, for in there with him were his sacrificial sister and his sacrificial mother – and my jogging clothes convenient because of the wiping, the wiping and the strange thin streams from my glands as I dropped among my family and should have died there, there at nowhere. Nowhere in a pool of my graceless fantasies.

As I looked up again from my memories Lily spoke from her eye, the tear like the drop of oil falling from its glass container into the pure melted snow. We both lay back on the pebbled recession as the waning afternoon sun fawned over us as though we were worth it. In my sun dreams I saw Kris but I couldn't see Debs because she was never there. I could see Garan, but not his wrecker sister Debs, whom he clutched in his shadow as if he knew times were coming.

And then the day began to die.

"No, I'm going to stay and enjoy this room, thank you." As I looked at Lily's lopsided expression, I knew a serenity, if a cautious one, that I had not known in a long time. Santo Laguaro had knelt with me in prayer, and I almost forgave him because of it.

"Are you *sure*?" she said. But her smile told it all.

We made love and slept in each other's arms, the window open to the gathering chill. Sometime during the night I got up to close off the outside air, and stopped by the balcony window. On the breast of the lake a boat seemed to drip with the light from its lamps, to coalesce with the figures on its deck. I forgot about the chill, making myself comfortable on the balcony, drinking the house wine, smoking one of Lily's cigarettes, then actually sleeping on the chair until the four o'clock dawn came to claim me.

As I pulled back the cover to check on her, I thought I heard a whisper from somewhere. But it was only the vineyards worker, staring back at me from chaos.

"Lily!" I hissed as I covered his face.

She obliged, laughing lightly.

"I'm sorry to have brought you here," I said.

"Don't be. I've my own sins to reflect over."

As she removed the cover completely, revealing her

jarring nakedness, I thought that easily could be true. Meanwhile, the vineyards worker had other tales to tend to, other iniquities to reap. We were alone in the room, as we were in the world, lovers among strangers. We clung to each other, sweating and searching for breath, until the light peeped through the cracks in the blinds, and then we talked from faces slashed by dawn about the skewed reality of being.

"You really adored Debs, didn't you?" she said at some point.

"You couldn't imagine what a monster she was. Yeah. I did adore her. I adored them all." With those words I let it come, the anticlimactic flood of tears, no less than *all* of the bottle's contents as Lily held me in her arms and whispered words of meaninglessness and salvation. I drifted off wondering what I was going to do now that I had no more missions to fulfill and no load to cast off my shoulders.

"Coffee," Lily said, holding a cup as she smiled down at me. Where she had gotten it I didn't know. But her smile was the color of my freedom.

The Fiesta purred to life under an Alpine blue sky, Lily looking like the goddess she was. There was a lightness about the world that made it subject to the caprice of the wind and weather, the mountains, the man and woman who visited its wonders. And yet, suddenly nothing was shallow to me, not Lily's perfection, nor her company, nor my own fathomless self-absorption that so defined me as a human being.

As we started out of the parking lot, Leonardo our waiter stopped us, presenting an empty vessel to take with us.

"*Grazi*," I told him as I handed the cruet to Lily.

But the face under the brim of the hat, offering a certain *ciao*, wasn't the waiter's.

As I sped away Lily wanted to know why. But I couldn't say why. We were wrong to invade the mountains, I was wrong to have brought her to Laguaro. I didn't know truth from sanity as I simply wanted to be out of there, down the winding roads to Lake Garda again. We managed to coexist without words as the kilometers coiled up to escort us in our descent. I knew that she wondered about my stability because of her calm . . .

Yet over the next hour or so we managed to find our way along the tunneled paths of the Gardasee to our Cottage Mediterraneano, the sun still shining as brightly as it would tomorrow and the next day. The pool would be a welcome diversion, a solvent of sorts for my still shedding layers. Lily went ahead without me, asking me to bring a wine cooler when I was finished in the bathroom. It took a while but eventually I vomited, the confusion as intertwined with my metabolism as Santo Laguaro's oil.

Outside, the sun transformed the lake into a mirror; the warmth felt good on my face as I found assurance in the exoticism of the property's cypress trees, in its palms spilling over walls of stone. But there was no assurance for what I found when I walked onto the pool's deck. The blood trailing along the concrete towards the reclining chair said only for the raw fact of it.

And Lily's eyes still locked upon her visitor peeking from beneath his hat before slipping away to his fields.

Darren is a widely published American writer living in Germany. He's been in TTA once before with 'Sugar Cream Pie' (TTA40), and he has a story forthcoming in *Crimewave 8: Cold Harbours*.

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NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

ONE

Blue sipped at her hazelnut-flavored Italian soda and glanced at her Mickey Mouse watch for the third time. Short arm on the twelve, long arm on the three. Goran was late again. Lack of punctuality was one of Blue's pet peeves, and she got increasingly irritated with each subsequent tick of Mickey's tail. She had witnessed human beings systematically attempt to capture time throughout the ages, measuring in ever-finer increments of micro, nano, pico, femto, but as those measurements grew increasingly exact, it seemed to Blue that people found more and more ways to be late.

The other patrons of the Brooklyn coffee shop chatted and devoured mocha lattés or other espresso drinks, oblivious to Blue's growing frustration. Leather-clad students in the corner discussed Baudrillard. Three men with nearly identical shaved heads and biker tattoos lamented their slow wireless networks. A man and a woman in spiky purple haircuts whispered intently, close enough to taste each other's breath. Shopping bags littered the floor next to all the trendy footwear, bags from Beacon's Closet, Century 21, Daffy's, Keith's Organic Produce, 7th Avenue Records, Straight From the Crate, and as Blue looked at these people, she didn't see their diversity, but instead saw a roomful of corpses. She saw their deaths, some sooner than others.

Goran Velicković was eighteen minutes late upon his grand arrival through the front door. He swept into the café with a flourish, his long black leather coat billowing out behind him like a cape. Everything about the man was bigger than life; he tended toward Armani and Gucci, and when he laughed, each person within a square block could hear it. He almost always wore an enormous smile, which he had to bleach periodically to remove the stains from habitual clove cigarette use.

He dropped into the seat opposite Blue with a dramatic sigh. "I am tardy, I know," he said, a waft of sweet-smelling cloves drifting across the table. "These fucking subway trains, yeah?"

"Sure, Goran. But I still managed to be on time."

Goran flashed his famous smile, the smile seen weekly on national television, the smile made eternal

by that toothpaste commercial, the one with Heidi Klum, the smile that led to admittance into any club in the city, the smile that charmed the pants off of whatever young-lady-of-the-moment he happened to be chasing. It was a smile that made most people, especially women, forgive him instantly. Fortunately, Blue was not most people.

"It's not going to work, Goran," she said.

"*Vrlo dobro, draga,*" he said. *Very well, my dear.* He leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "I apologize for being late. Please excuse this most grievous transgression."

Despite herself, the corners of Blue's mouth turned up. The man was damn charming.

"Apology accepted," she said. "You want to order anything before we get to why I called you here?"

"Yes indeed. I have been craving a chai since this morning." Goran pushed himself up, slid out of his leather coat, gently placed the coat on the back of his chair, then glided over to the counter. Blue watched the muscles in his back move underneath his grey sweater while he fidgeted in line, and was reminded of how his muscles moved without any clothes at all. They had been lovers only briefly, a two-week fling amid the falling bombs and scattered gunfire in the last days of Slobodan Milosević's reign.

After a moment, Goran walked back over to the table with a slice of chocolate espresso cake and a cup of steaming chai, and sipped liberally at the tea. "This shit," he said. "They do not know how to make chai in this country. Kod Konja in Belgrade, now there was a place could make you think you were drinking Heaven." He sipped again and made a face. "Fuck." A sigh. "I met Milena in that café, you know."

Goran normally didn't talk about his dead wife. "Really?"

"Yes," he said. "I never told you this?"

"No."

"Well, it was long ago. We were both very young, still at university. I went to the café after class to meet some friends, but was early. She sat two tables in front of me, so beautiful in the sunlight." Goran sighed and took another sip of chai. He smiled briefly, an involuntary reflex, and continued. "She wore a pony's tail back then, so her hair was out of her face. But I remember one piece hanging down, here." He motioned to an area around his right eye. "She was looking out the window, her eyes so sad. If I had brought my camera, she would have been a masterpiece."

Goran sat silent for several moments. "It was not meant to last," he said. "A car crash with a drunk driver and I am made single again. But for six years, we were happy as anyone I have ever known. You remind me of her sometimes."

"I do?" Blue was fairly certain she couldn't pass for Serbian. If anything, she appeared Chinese. It was a look that had served her well in recent years as the American fascination with Asia had risen sharply.

"Something in the eyes," Goran said. "You express a similar sadness. Your eyes are brown and Milena's were blue, but sadness knows all races equally. It might be this is what drew me to you in the first place."

Blue coughed briefly into her fist. "Goran, the reason I called you here . . . I saw you on *Young America* last week."

Goran clapped once and sat up straighter. "Yes! My newest reality show!"

"Reality-*based* show," Blue interrupted. "That show is *based* on reality, and shows only a passing resemblance to it. Anyway, I saw you last week and did some digging. It's the third show you've been on in two years."

Goran nodded and shrugged, an expression of false humility. "Yes. What can I say? The American public, they love my face. They cannot resist my charisma."

The door to the café opened and in walked a tall, svelte black man with a bald head and no eyebrows. He wore a light olive sweater, though the temperature outside was in the mid-forties, and he took a seat near the door.

"Do you remember your life prior to meeting me?" Blue asked.

"Of course, *draga*," Goran said. "The world did not begin with you, you know."

"How was your love life back then? As busy as it is now?"

"I *was* married, if you remember."

"Yes, but how long did it take to start that relationship?"

Goran's eyebrows furrowed and he looked sidelong at Blue. "Two years. You know this."

"That's right, it took two years of wearing her down, right? Two years of wooing, of being considered only a friend. Two years before your first kiss."

"She had other suitors. Plus, we were both deep in our studies. Why do you bring this up?"

"Isn't it odd that it took so long to win Milena's heart, when only a smile and wink is enough for pretty blonde things to spread their legs for you now? That is, if the stories you've told me are true."

"Yes," Goran said, "all true. I can almost snap my fingers and a girl is sucking me off in the middle of Central Park. I had not thought on it, but I suppose I assumed it God's compensation for taking Milena from me. No?"

"No," Blue said. "Think back, Goran. Try to remember when your luck started to change, when people began to respond differently to you."

Goran frowned and folded his arms together. "I do not like where this conversation has turned. What point are you trying to make?"

"Just think for a moment."

Goran looked toward the exposed ductwork suspended from the ceiling. Next to his cup of chai sat his slice of cake, uneaten, the smell of chocolate making Blue's stomach grumble. "I suppose it was when I was helping to fight Milosević. When I met you."

"Exactly. Something happened when we were together, when we were intimate. A part of me was transferred to you. Since then, you've been living on borrowed charisma, sponged natural magic. You've been getting in the beds of young women and on television because of me."

Goran shook his head. "I do not understand."

Blue motioned to his half-empty cup of chai. "Watch."

The liquid in the cup trembled, then began to swirl counter-clockwise all by itself. The swirl inverted and twisted up into a braided cone, which rose several inches above the lip of the cup. A droplet detached itself from the top of the cone and hovered in a perfect milky sphere in front of Goran's eyes. He stood up quickly and backed away, knocking his chair over with a clatter. At his abrupt movement, the chai in the cup returned to its normal placid state, and the sphere dropped to the table's surface with a quiet plish. Goran's mouth hung open. "How?"

"Goran, sit down. You're attracting attention."

"*Me*? You are the one who – "

"No one else saw," she hissed. "Sit down."

He righted his chair, then sank down slowly as if expecting to be burned by it. Sweat stood out on his brow and upper lip, and he trembled slightly. The other patrons were still staring, and Blue smiled to indicate everything was all right.

"How is this possible?" Goran breathed. "This should not be so."

"Like I said, natural magic. In you, it manifested as charisma and self-confidence. But others handle it differently."

"There are others?"

Blue nodded. "Many others. Most of them you wouldn't know about, since they don't go around broadcasting their gifts on national television."

"So." Goran cleared his throat, picked up his fork, then put it back down. "So what happens now?"

"The magic you're carrying? I need it back."

"But . . . but if what you say is true, if I return this magic to you, I will no longer attract women. I will lose my place on my show, be kicked into the gutter."

"Not exactly. In order for me to get the magic back, you have to die."

Goran lurched to his feet and shoved his arms into his leather coat. "I do not accept this. However I got this gift, it is mine now. Have I not earned it for all the suffering I have seen?"

Blue leaned forward in her chair and touched Goran's fingers with her own, looked him dead in the eyes. "It doesn't belong to you. We can do this easy or hard, it's your choice. If you give it back willingly, we can make it much less painful, blissful even. If we're forced to track you down – and we will – I can't guarantee anything other than unimaginable agony."

Goran took a step toward the door, breaking contact with her touch. "Goodbye, Blue. I do not think we shall speak again."

Blue sighed and nodded to the bald black man at the door. "No, Goran, we won't."

Before Goran could take another step, small green flames sprouted from the toes of his expensive shoes. He yelped in surprise and attempted to stamp the flames out, but they grew and traveled up his legs to his torso, his arms, his face. The eyes of the black man seated by the door blazed as green as the fire engulfing the shrieking Serbian. Several customers leapt out of their seats – the purple-headed duo, one of the bikers, two of the students – and tackled Goran onto the floor in an attempt to smother the unearthly fire, but were consumed themselves. The remaining patrons screamed and fled the coffeehouse. Blue sighed again as Goran and the good Samaritans were immolated in front of her, then took the fork off the table and cut a piece out of the cake. The combined flavor of coffee and chocolate tasted like regret, power, and inevitability.

TWO

A confusion of colors, swirling, twirling, bursting apart then fusing back together, a Jackson Pollock gone horribly wrong. A hundred thousand cans of paint splattered over the canvas of Goran's existence. No eyes to speak of, but a part of him marveled at the kaleidoscopic display to which he was the sole audience. That eruption of yellows and oranges: the bombs and explosions in the skies above Belgrade. This slow languid dribble of purples and reds: the profile of his dead wife before he introduced himself in that café. The intense inertia of the greens and blues: the form of a man and woman hurrying away from a building fire that they caused. All other colors faded away, and Goran could feel whatever part of him that still existed being drawn toward the green man, or perhaps dragged behind him.

The violent screeching of uncountable nails on chalkboards, the rustiest of swing sets, the white noise of an infinite number of television sets and clothes washing machines. A cacophony of every sound ever created, all at once, assaulting Goran, penetrating the fabric of his being, a hellish mechanical malevolence. The crackle of flame, the piercing shrill of police sirens, the blat of car horns.

And then, abruptly, the sounds softened and the colors resolved. Goran drifted roughly twenty feet above the striding form of the bald black man who had killed him. A translucent umbilicus originating from the man's head reached up and connected somewhere in Goran's midsection, though he could not perceive exactly where. His own body remained hidden to him, though he could once again sense his arms and legs. As he concentrated, other vinelike threads became visible, sprouting upward from the bald man's head like a forest of writhing translucent tubes, extending upwards into the space surrounding Goran. The air shimmered as from the heat above a bombed-out car. Shapes drifted in the haze of his peripheral vision, but dispersed when he attempted to focus on them.

Below him, the bald man was speaking. "That seemed a bit excessive, my sister. Are you sure it was absolutely necessary?"

The woman walking next to him turned her head. "You know it had to be done, Dane," Blue said to the

. . . A JACKSON POLLOCK GONE HORRIBLY WRONG

black man. "You're not getting squeamish, are you?"

"Of course not," Dane said. Goran could smell the faint acrid tang of smoke emanating from the man, as if it lived in his skin. A dim green glow surrounded his body, flickering and wavering, giving the impression of a low fire. "Just a shame, that's all."

"Well, it's one more down," Blue said. "I would have been happier had he given it back willingly, especially since it would have meant sex with him one more time, but you saw his reaction."

Goran wasn't sure how he could hear them so clearly, but discovered that the same was true if he concentrated on anyone on the street below him. The street vendors, the pedestrians, the self-proclaimed asphalt preachers. People he originally would have thought talking to themselves were in actuality having conversations with ghostly interlocutors that no one else could see. Ghosts were everywhere in fact, whispering in ears, tripping up feet, lifting up skirts in an imagined breeze, talking incessantly, the street and sky packed with spirits, choked with the dead.

Had he known about this constant claustrophobic profusion of ghosts in the everyday world, taking up any available space, chattering endlessly to those who seemed not to listen, he might have gone mad. As it was, he was now one of them, floating helplessly behind his murderer, wishing he could pass into the afterlife and be with his beloved Milena again. He was abruptly and overwhelmingly furious at Blue for destroying his life, for passing her magic to him in the first place. He still would have had many years left, and there were places he wished to visit, no longer possible to see. His rage was a palpable thing, boiling out of him, a physical force, and the air darkened around him and sparked with electricity. He howled his anger and impotent rage, and the dogs below pissed themselves involuntarily and whimpered at their masters. The eruption from his unseen and unfelt lungs brought the world further into focus, more solid, more real. And in that moment, he was jolted from his helpless floating position and drawn past dozens, hundreds of other umbilici, pulled inextricably to another connected soul, a formless shape which quickly took the form of a small man, the two of them drawn together like opposite magnetic forces, together and through and within.

Goran was within the other man's soul.

He stood in the middle of a small rustic library, aware again of physical corporeal sensations. He wore a Hawai'ian shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts, an outfit he never would have comprehended while he was

alive. But they suited him here, in this place. Apart from the books on the shelves and the carpet on the floor, the room was bare. And he had a hard time describing the objects that were there in his mind; adjectives eluded him. The books were neither tall nor short, red nor blue nor yellow; they were simply . . . books. The carpet under his feet was not plush, flat, mangy, or comfortable. It just *was*. Goran glanced at the titles on the shelves in front of him, but could not read them. The letters were standard Roman type, but the words they formed were gibberish, no language he had ever seen, the alphanumerics shifting positions as he looked, constantly changing meaning.

A door behind him opened, and he turned. Into the room walked a short hairy man, wearing identical clothes. But where the colors and patterns on Goran's clothing remained static, on the small man they moved constantly, dizzyingly, a hundred lava lamps thrown together. The small man smiled and opened his mouth to talk; out poured what Goran imagined the written type he had seen on the spines of the books would sound like out loud, an innumerable amount of voices all talking at once. Goran winced and the small man stopped talking. He beckoned Goran forward with his hands, motioning for Goran to follow him.

They stepped into the hallway outside the door, and followed it until it ended, at an identical door. It opened onto an identical hallway, which they took to its end. This door opened onto another identical hallway. Goran and the small man entered hallway after hallway, their path discretely linear, though after forty or fifty doors, Goran began sensing a direction change, a constant turning of rights. Time had no meaning in this place, in this immortal soul; they walked on and on, always another door, always another hallway, until Goran felt he had never been anywhere else. He had always existed in this space, the hallways were all that ever were.

Goran touched the small man on the shoulder and stopped. He turned around and walked back to the door through which they had just passed, which had closed behind them. There was no reason not to expect that another hallway would lie beyond, but Goran turned the knob anyway. The door emptied into the library they had started in, but it was different this time, more familiar. The room smelled of the must and leather of his father's study in Belgrade, and the overhead light shone more softly. When he looked at the books again, he found that he could now read them, tome after tome written in beautiful Cyrillic, and he was momentarily overcome with homesickness.

"I knew you would figure it out."

The small man was smiling again, his teeth slightly discolored. On his clothing, the colors were now still. He emanated a slight fragrance of the clove cigarettes Goran used to smoke.

"What did I figure out?" Goran asked.

"The path to understanding. To travel along the circle, and then to realize that sometimes to go forward, you must go backward."

"Circle?"

The small man nodded. "It is the geometric structure of this place. You felt the right turns as we traveled?" Goran nodded. "If you circumscribe a circle with a polygon of infinite sides, a series of seemingly straight lines can form a curve. The angles between the sides reduce to an infinitesimal number, and in effect can connect in a circular pattern."

"Is that why we can communicate? Because we circumnavigated this circle?"

"Partially. The circle realigns your perception of language."

"But this isn't Serbian we're speaking. Or English."

"That's right. We're communicating through *logos*, what some might call the Word of God. All language is representative, an approximation of the world around us. A book in English will be *livre* in French, *boek* in Dutch, *buch* in German, *biblio* in Greek, *libro* in Italian and Spanish, *et cetera*. So many words to describe one object. *Logos* is the True language, the basis for what all those other languages hope to translate." The man smiled again, proud of himself. Goran wanted to sit down.

He lowered himself into a plush leather chair that hadn't existed a moment ago. Had he conjured it by thought?

"Yes," said the man. "Thought equals action in this place."

"So since we're speaking the Word of God, does that make you God?"

"Not exactly."

And as abruptly as an eyeblink, they were no longer in the library, but on a wharf at the edge of some seaside city, the salt and decay a physical presence in the air. There had been no sense of the time of day in the library, but out here it was nighttime. The moon shone waxy and jaundiced overhead, remarkably free of craters; the lunar illumination that filtered down through a haze of clouds cast a sickly pall on the piers, the few sloops tied to the dock, even the water itself. Goran's clothes had changed. He now wore a charcoal-grey suit made from a material finer than silk. It fit him perfectly, a second skin.

Goran's guide stood next to him on the wharf, still clad in his inscrutable outlandish clothing. Even the colors on his shirt were dulled and dirtied by the diseased lunar illumination.

"Where are we now?" Goran asked.

"Borstalle-Purgatoire. A city of lost souls." He turned away from the wharf, toward the city. "Please, follow me. I will answer all your questions, but I'm craving a chai."

"Chai? That is my favorite drink."

"I know."

The man led Goran off of the wharf and into a warehouse district. Block after block of grey rectangular brick buildings, overgrown with lichen and shelf mushrooms. The smell of decomposition was stronger here, as if the city were rotting from the inside. Acorn-style lamp posts lit their way, casting off an almost greenish light. The night was humid and permeated by particulates of dust and spores. Goran coughed.

Their destination was the Café of the Asphyxiated Borough, a smallish coffeehouse and bar on the edge of the warehouse district, decorated by a sign in blockish script next to a woodcut of two disembodied hands strangling a donkey. Inside, the café was filled with customers who spoke in melancholy whispers. The air was thick with defeat and resignation.

The guide ordered two chais at the counter, then he and Goran sat at a table in the corner. On the walls around them were shelves after shelves of old books, dusty and disused.

"So what exactly is this place?" Goran asked.

"A café."

"No, the city."

"This is the place we go who are killed or fundamentally changed by the elementals."

"Blue . . . she was from the elements?"

The man nodded. "Water. She is a trickster, the first Trickster, in fact. She can change her appearance to serve her needs, even change her gender. She sprang forth from this place, where all the world's magic originates. It encompasses a vast terrain, and Borstalle-Purgatoire is just a bump on its surface."

"So we are not ghostly balloons connected to our killer's head in the real world?"

"We are, but we also exist here. The afterlife doesn't constitute a single place. Look," he said, "look at those six men over at the bar." Goran looked. They all seemed haggard and withdrawn, as if they had suffered enormous hardship, six different versions of Job.

"All of these men were blighted by the Trickster, as was everyone in this place. These six were the most recent before you."

"So how am I supposed to be of help?" Goran asked.

"We, all of us," the guide said, "are able to pool our energy and send one person back to the real world. The elementals are on their way to a used books store, and it is this place where we will send you. They are far too strong to fight, so instead you will trap them."

"How?"

"There is a book, one capable of sending them away forever. It has been there, among its brothers and sisters, for some time, enchanted so that no one will ever pick it up. You will know it when you see it, and you will know what to do with it.

"The catch is that you will no longer be able to die. You will banish them, and set all of us free, but will never be able to see Milena again. As guardian of the book, it will never leave your side, not even when all the stars have burned out."

"Quite a price for being a hero," Goran said.

"It is," the guide said. "Which is why no one else has been brave enough yet."

Goran gazed at the assembled patrons of the café, broken down, miserable, trapped in this limbo against their wishes, in despair, the apotheosis of depression. He thought about that first magical meeting with Milena, the way she fit so perfectly into his life for the short time they were together. He remembered his rage at her death, and how his anger fueled his rebellious activities against Milosević. That rage, that anger was sparked anew by his recent murder. How could Blue have done that to him?

"I'll do it," he said.

"You understand the costs?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? There is no turning back."

Goran took a breath, held it, let it out.

"I understand. Do it."

The guide leaned forward, stared into Goran's face, and began speaking, softly and rhythmically, barely above a whisper, "*Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat . . .* " Chanted, a mantra, the words, the nonsense words filled his body, his brain. The sound was coming from all around him now, and he could see every man and woman in the café, all turned in his direction, all speaking in unison, eyes wide, desperate, pushing their words into him, permeating the air with language. Goran's vision doubled, trebled, multiple images of the mass of humanity overlapping, intersecting, growing bright, intense, so intense, their internal light blinding him, transforming him, transporting him, a cacophony of hope and longing, a dissonant polyphony, a beautiful destruction –

Goran blinked. The café, the voices, the damp atmosphere were gone. He stood before a massive bookshelf in his grey suit, his hand resting, lightly, on the spine of a slim book at his eye level. He pulled the book from the shelf, and it felt powerful in his hand. No author name adorned the cover, but the title proclaimed, in bold white letters, *Lies and Little Deaths*. He felt as if he was always meant to hold this book.

A quick glance around, at the tall bookshelves, the narrow aisleways, and he knew where he was. The Strand. Manhattan's block-long used books store. He had visited several times, always able to find obscure books as presents to friends, to lovers. He was in the basement, among the miles of hardcover review and advanced reading copies. The book in his hands, in its pristine untouched condition, felt very out of place down there.

He cradled *Lies and Little Deaths* in the crook of his arm, and made his way upstairs. Every time he had previously visited the Strand he had barely been able to move, pressed in on all sides by the multitudes of book lovers. But when he emerged from the basement of the store, to the main level, it was nearly empty. He slowly tracked his way through the aisles, seeing only a becapped teenager in the Science Fiction section, and an attractive redhead in Art History. Goran made three careful circuits through the store before remembering the Occult section.

Blue and her brother Dane pored over a large dusty-looking tome, their backs to Goran. If Dane was given time to react, Goran knew that the store would go up like kindling, the yellowed paper and old glue of eighteen miles of books the perfect fuel for the blaze.

Goran opened the book.

He wasn't sure what he expected to happen. At the very least, he imagined a sudden rushing of wind, a micro-tornado right there in the aisle, howling, a disarray, books flying off the shelves, hair blasted back, perhaps some lightning, Blue and Dane looking at Goran simultaneously, eyes unbelieving, mouths open, screaming, "*Noooooooo*!" a primal shriek, barely heard over the roar of the windstorm, incredulous, in shock at the fact that not more than an hour before they had seen, absolutely *seen* his body erupt in green flames, aghast that he had found the only way to defeat them, knowing they were trapped, *tricked*, doomed forever to their own purgatory, their bodies losing cohesion, molecules sucked into his book, their screams amplified to godlike intensity, the sound bursting Goran's eardrums as they were pulled, drawn into the book, the wind, the wind –

But none of that happened. He opened the book, heard a pop of displaced air, and then Blue and Dane were gone, vanished, disappeared. That was it. He was a little disappointed.

Goran retraced his path to the front counter and paid for the slim book. The cashier, a young guy wearing a Hawai'ian shirt, unusual for this temperature, this time of the year, familiar though Goran couldn't place where he might have met him, this cashier rang up the book, took Goran's money and said, "Thank you."

As Goran was about to exit the store, to step out into his new immortal life, he felt a hand on his arm. The beautiful redhead from Art History smiled up at him.

"You're that guy, aren't you? Goran something? From that reality show?"

"No," he said, "I'm not that guy. You're thinking of someone else. I'm sorry."

He turned from her pretty and disillusioned face, his new book resting comfortably in a jacket pocket, opened the door, and stepped out onto the crowded streets of New York.

Jason's work has appeared in over twenty venues, but this is his TTA debut. With his wife, artist-writer Janet Chui, he runs Two Cranes Press, a critically-acclaimed small press out of North Carolina. He maintains a website and journal at jasonlundberg.net.

THE DODO HAS LANDED

NOT ALL PROGRESS IS GOOD PROGRESS!

ALLEN ASHLEY

For most of my adult life my vote in the General Election has counted for nothing. I grew up in the pre-boundary change Finchley constituency of the evil empress Milk Snatcher Thatcher; in a later extraordinary contrast I lived in a run-down part of the East End with Old Labour stalwart Peter Shore as my MP. Unassailably blue to regulation red. This time around, I'm suddenly at the centre of the illegal Iraq war, anti-Blair backlash which led to several high profile casualties during the early hours of May 6th. In detail, I live in Enfield Southgate where a slight swing away from Stephen Twigg let the Tories reclaim the seat; I work in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency in which the Bangladeshi Muslim community deserted Blair babe and war supporter Oona King in huge numbers, transferring their allegiance to George Galloway's nattily named Respect party. For those 'on the ground', both events were predictable. Mrs Dodo and I were leafleted by Labour so many times we thought they'd opened a new pizza parlour.

Now, here's a thought: wouldn't it be great if one's vote was important during *every* election? In fact, let's take it a stage further: wouldn't it be brilliant if real people could actually vote directly on all the major issues affecting our lives? In short: Democracy, it's a great idea – we should try it.

I've just edited *The Elastic Book of Numbers*, so let's talk maths semantics. My idea of a majority is, for example, 7 out of 10. Put the voting patterns on a pie chart and the red segment is little more than a third: a sizeable *minority*. In most constituencies you can guarantee more citizens voted *against* the winning candidate than for him or her. However, because this country is saddled with the archaic and awful first past the post system, we are set up for government by the minority for the rest of time. The current administration got in with approximately 36% of the vote yet holds 55% of the seats. How is that fair? How is that democracy in action? And we want to impose this concept on the rest of the world – be it Iraq, Afghanistan or the Sea of Tranquillity! These greasy fuckers can inflict all sorts of rubbish legislation onto the whole populace for the next four to five years and we get one (apparent) chance to change things.

In theory, MPs are our representatives. Yet they don't represent us when they are following a three-line whip from their ultimate paymasters.

A move to Proportional Representation is a democratic and evolutionary necessity. Those who vehemently oppose it are those who have the most power to lose. Shouldn't all the voices within our vibrant/fractured society have a chance of being heard? Lots of commentators say that PR offers a platform for extremists but surely it's better to have them represented in Parliament, hear their ideas and then win the argument through intelligent discourse rather than pretending these people don't exist or hoping they go away? Besides, one man's extremism is another man's zeitgeist thinker. Go back seventy years and promote gay rights and you'd be hung from the nearest lamp-post. Moreover, if our democracy isn't strong enough to show up the errors in opposing points of view then our beliefs are little more than a habit. Anyway, some would say that a politician such as Ian Paisley holds extreme views. He's been in the House of Commons as long as I can remember and the walls haven't tumbled yet.

The Government missed an opportunity to democratise this country when under-taking the reform of the House of Lords. They could easily have had the upper chamber totally based upon popular vote, proportional representation, with every cross counting whether for Labour, Tories, Libs or Monster Raving Loony Party. Probably they wanted their own loonies safely in place for the next couple of decades.

When holding the Early Learning big pencil and deciding where to put the X, one has to consider a whole range of compromises – they've done a good job on the economy but this other lot are better on law and order, then again I like the proposals from that other party regarding health and education . . . This so-called 'best fit' model is by any serious analysis unacceptable in an evolved society. Why leave the smarmy, perma-tanned career politicians to decide everything for us? This country needs to hold more referenda. Weren't we promised a vote regarding Britain's entry into European Monetary Union over eight years ago? What's the hold-up, Gordon? We should be enfranchised by encouraging active participation in many more decisions that affect our daily lives and our future. And if costs money to organise? Well, fund it out of the Lottery or something.

Mrs Dodo and I were leafleted by Labour so many times we thought they'd opened a new pizza parlour

Something I'm not in favour of, though, is lowering the voting age. Vote at 16? No way! Too many things are already allowed too early. Even 18 is too young. Should people really be choosing anything other than colour of the uniform baseball cap whilst they're still at school? The next step would be to take it down to 14. We could end up with David Beckham as Prime Minister, Kylie at the Home Office, and for Chancellor? Why, 50 Cent.

We have seen recently how postal voting can be manipulated with the jailing of some Labour councillors in Birmingham. The prospect of Internet or text voting is even more frightening. With the latter, the whole country will be beholden to the wishes of lippy, technology literate 6-year-olds. Even Supernanny won't be able to save us.

The Government wants to reach out to young people who don't vote. Maybe *da kidz* are actually smarter than we give them credit for because they realise that it won't change things dramatically whatever they vote, especially with the manner in which Blair, Brown *et al* have repositioned Labour on the Centre Right during the past eight years.

Most MPs start out as lawyers, which in common parlance is one slippery branch above estate agents in the slime pool. A good lawyer won't care whether you're innocent or guilty because they can argue either side: it's all about their skills in debate. Think about how many technicalities these briefs have been able to invoke to keep fraudsters, killers and race hate clerics out of jail. If you defend yourself and your family against an armed intruder, one of these scumbags will bankrupt you in their bid for compensation. And this is the class of people we elect to govern us? I despair.

Still, whoever you vote for it won't save Rover at Longbridge, it won't save 40,000 planned civil service redundancies, it won't stop jobs being 'out-sourced' – manufacturing to the Far East, call centres to India and so on.

In the words of Patrick McGoohan as The Prisoner, "If voting changed anything, they'd abolish it."

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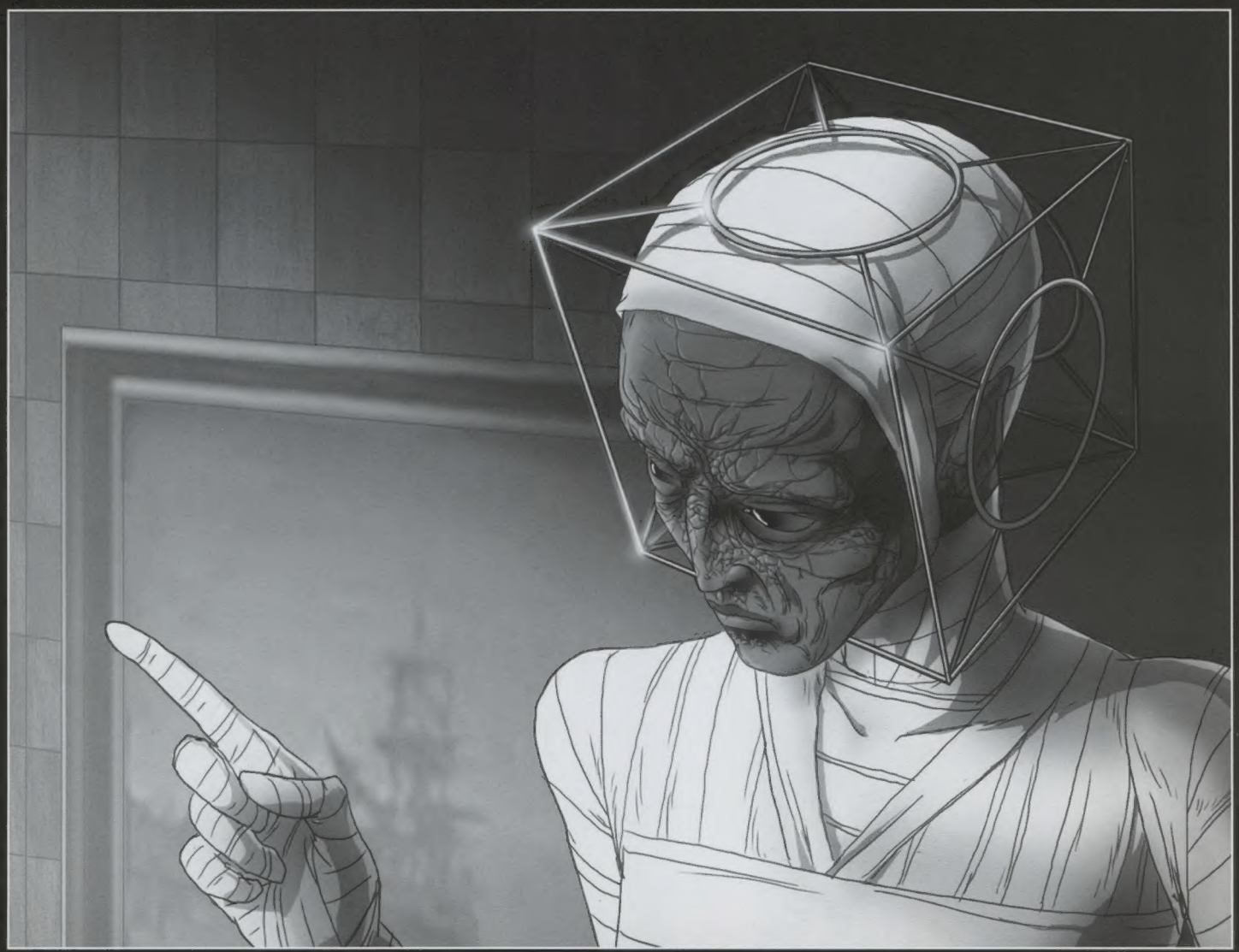

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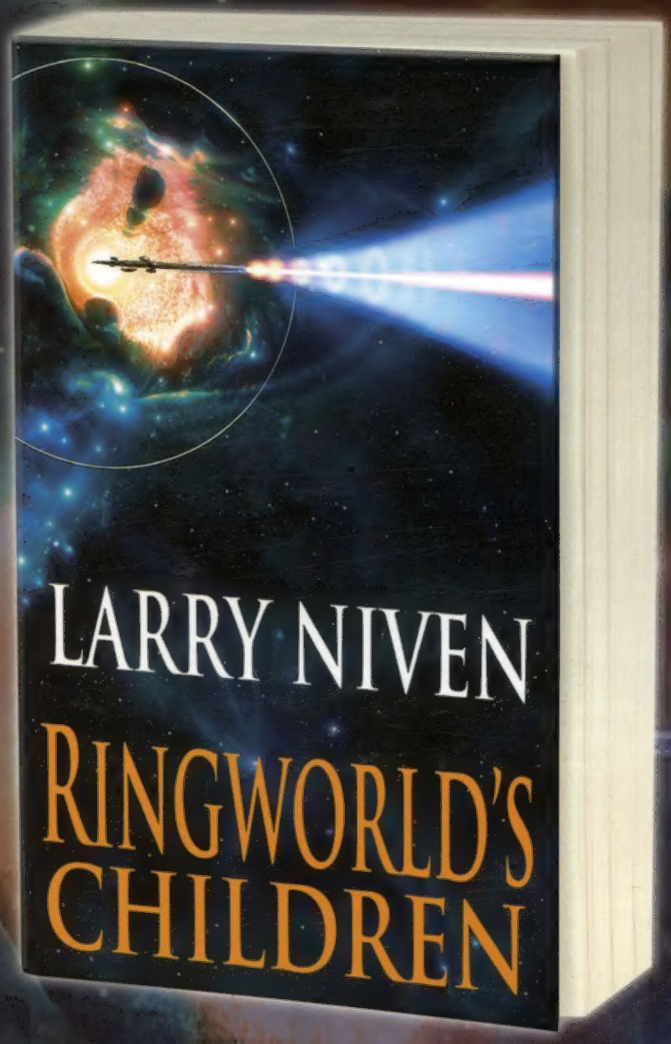

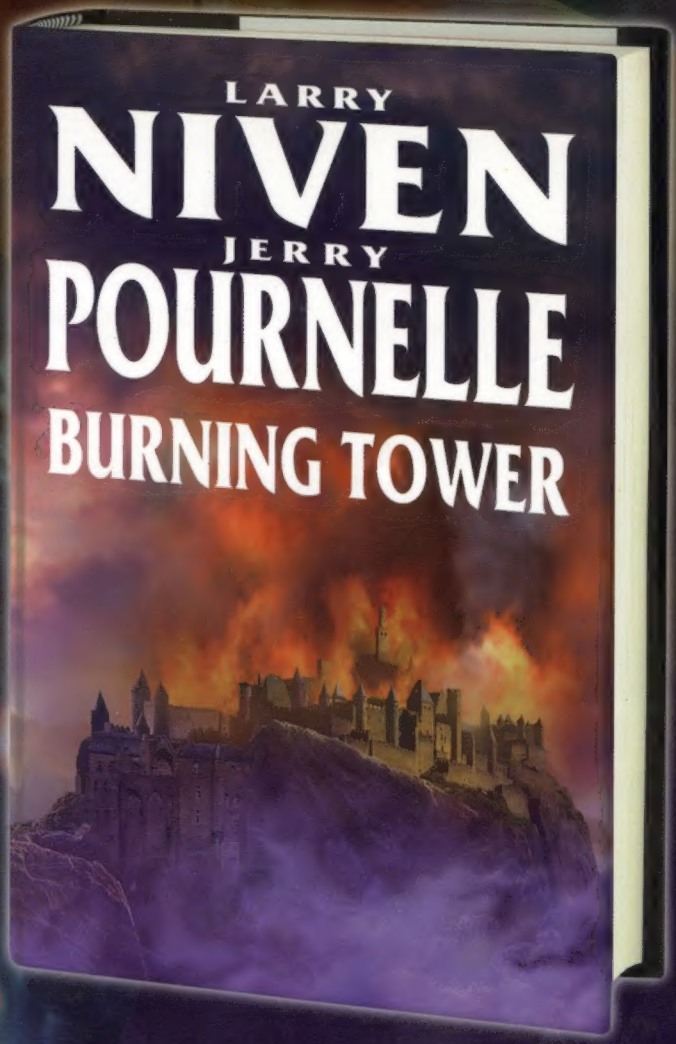

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